Cultural Value

The Uses of Poetry: Measuring the Value of Engaging with Poetry in Lifelong Learning and Development

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Executive Summary
The ‘Uses of Poetry’ project (2013-14) was a six-month, inter-disciplinary exploration of the value of poetry at different stages of people’s lifelong learning and development. The project brought together a team of researchers and practitioners from literary studies, education, psychology, drama, philosophy and creative writing in order to gather and evaluate existing measures of the value of poetry from these respective disciplines, and to test out new, inter-disciplinary ways of articulating the value of poetry that better synthesised its roles at all stages of development.

The research team’s initial experiments and tests of principle suggest that poetry has a distinctive value compared to other cultural objects and experiences, not least because of its ability to connect people’s cognitive and affective responses, minds and bodies, and experiences and memories. The project demonstrates that the value of people’s encounters with poetry can be enhanced by modes of delivery that engage fully with more than one of these responses at the same time. The report revisits the project’s collaborative research process in order to demonstrate the benefits of combining disciplinary approaches to understanding cultural value, and to identify good practice in exploratory inter-disciplinary research.
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**Key words**

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The Uses of Poetry

Poetry and the Cultural Value Project

Why does poetry matter in an investigation of cultural value? The value of poetry, and of literature more widely, as noted in the original vision of the AHRC Cultural Value Project, has hitherto been under-researched. One of the reasons for this neglect might be the sheer diversity of ways in which people can encounter poetry in their lives: through months of study at school, or by chance on the radio or at a wedding; reading in solitude, or recalling odd words or phrases from long-distant memory.

As a result, poetry can elude the established quantitative and qualitative measures of cultural value used by building-based institutions such as theatres, galleries and museums to gauge the value of their visitors’ experiences. First, while a visit to a theatre, museum or gallery is a distinct event in time, an encounter with poetry is much more difficult to pin down. What if the encounter was involuntary, fleeting, or partial? Is value located in people’s immediate response, or in what it might come to mean to them years later? Second, the funding (public or private) of building-based cultural institutions can bring with it a vocabulary of, for example, ‘access’, ‘experience’ or ‘creativity’ to articulate the value of visitors’ experiences (Rumbold 2010); poetry is usually outside such funding structures, and its readers and hearers much less likely to be sent a follow-up questionnaire. Third, building-based institutions can accumulate a collective response to a particular object or experience; poetry, by contrast, can be experienced in myriad individual encounters in limitless locations.

Yet while this report explores what is distinctive about poetry, it also reveals how poetry can expose the limitations of existing measures of all kinds of cultural experience; and help to answer questions that lie at the heart of the cultural value debate. First, poetry only exaggerates the dilemma that is common to the evaluation of all cultural objects: namely, when and where does the value of a cultural object lie? Is it intrinsic to (or ascribed to) the object itself (such as a poem, a painting or a play)? Does it occur in the moment of encounter (when reading, seeing or watching a performance)? Or is value created in what people go on to do with their experience (whether contributing to their sense of well-being or identity, or encouraging them to express themselves creatively)? Second, poetry reveals the dangers of a ready-made vocabulary of cultural value, which could pre-determine, rather than liberate, people’s sense of what they get out of their cultural experiences. Third, and above all, poetry intensifies the challenges of how one captures the value of the individual’s encounter with culture, and then aggregates that value on a large scale. Politically-driven surveys such as Arts Council England’s ‘Arts Debate’ and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport’s ‘CASE’ study have found it difficult to reconcile the individual narratives of value that they gathered with the collective or economic terms of ‘public value’ or the Green Book respectively; this is a challenge for all kinds of cultural institution.

This project, then, devotes particular attention to the Cultural Value Project’s acknowledged challenges both of ‘analysing and evaluating the actual experience of arts and culture’, and of ‘extrapolating valuations from individuals’ stated preferences’. ‘The
Uses of Poetry’ contributes to the Project’s aim of advancing ‘the way in which we talk about the value of cultural engagement and the methods by which we evaluate that value’ by offering a poetry-focussed ‘examination of the cultural experience itself and its impact on individuals and its benefit to society’. Poetry has historically been prized both as an ‘intrinsically’ valuable cultural object, and as the source of a cultural encounter that has beneficial instrumental effects, such as ‘an ability to reflect on difficult aspects of one's own life and those of others’, ‘an appreciation of the other and an understanding of oneself’ and ‘improved physical and mental health outcomes’. The combined academic and professional expertise of our research team in the role that poetry plays in identity formation, autobiographical memory, emotional connection, and in post-traumatic treatment has enabled us to go beyond the limiting binary oppositions of these categories. We have begun to identify ways of uniting the values ascribed to poetry in different aspects of lifelong learning and development, and to develop a more holistic sense of the value of engaging with poetry at all stages of life.

**What is poetry?**

What defines a poem? While we do not attempt comprehensively to pin it down, the process of defining the term has helped to make explicit any tacit understandings in our work and to shape our research activities.

One perspective on poetry that usefully informed our research is derived from ecological psychology and the work of James Gibson (1966). Gibson used the word ‘affordances’ to suggest that the meaning-making potential of any artefact arises in the interaction between human subject and that artefact. Affordances are a matter of perception. Both ‘perception’ and ‘interaction’ are important in this account of meaning-making in that artefacts are not held to have intrinsic, universal or transcendent meanings that can be uniformly decoded. The artefact itself is a product of a specific cultural system that has evolved historically; and is perceived by an individual who, in turn, is embedded in a particular sociocultural context, at a particular point in time. Such a view of meaning-making allows for the affordances of the particular artefact to change within the lifecycle of the individual perceiver as well as over longer historical cycles. Understanding particular kinds of texts as having certain affordances allows us to make some categorisations that are based on their potential for certain kinds of meaning-making rather than based on a text’s correspondence to any list of formal features or generic characteristics.

Such a view of the properties, potential or affordances of particular kinds of language-use can also be informed by a more broadly cultural psychology of the kind elaborated by Michael Cole (1996). From this perspective, a poem would be regarded as a cultural artefact of a symbolic kind that is used to mediate the individual perceiver-subject’s activity in the social world. Again, the artefact does not have intrinsic meaning in and of itself but becomes the site for meaning-making as the person uses/reads/writes the poem in the process of acting on the world. The object or goal of the subject’s activity is a driving factor from this perspective – why is the artefact being used and for what ends? Used for the purposes of stimulating recall of food items during
a visit to the supermarket, a poem is probably not as useful as a short list. But a poem would probably hit the spot more effectively if directed at a lover on Valentine’s day than a short list of the lover’s notable features. Thus, again, the affordances of the text are related to the ways in which that text is perceived and used. Seeing a poem as a mediating (between the person and an aspect of the world they seek to work on) artefact rather than an exhibit in the ‘canon of literature’ is a profoundly different understanding of the uses of poetry in any setting whether educational, therapeutic or literary. None of which is to say that meaning is determined by the single interaction of perceiver and artefact but that the affordances for meaning-making evolve historically as the perceiver-subject develops and as the collective, social evaluation of the artefact-in-use develops too.

Although we might say that anything that is recognised as poetry (on the basis of its meaning-making potential) is probably poetry, it is also worthwhile to try to account for differences in the language of texts recognized as poetry from language in other types of texts that usually are not. To address this question, the work of Britton (1972, 1982, etc.) is useful. James Britton’s work on poetry became informed by various empirical projects (such as the study of the development of children’s writing abilities), by philosophical interests (Langer, Polanyi, Rorty, etc.) and by the arrival, in 1962, of the first English translation of Russian psychologist Vygotsky’s Thought and Language, which offered Britton a theory of mind derived from the empirical study of human development as well as the study of philosophy and literature.

Britton’s first distinction was between literary and non-literary discourse and in doing so he drew on linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson and semiotician Thomas Seboek. From Jakobson, Britton drew the different functions of language in speech situations and writing: expressive (or emotive); referential; poetic; phatic; metalingual; conative (related to action). The poetic function in this taxonomy was equivalent to ‘verbal arts’ and Britton followed Jakobson in insisting that one could only talk about or categorize on the basis of ‘dominant function’; all utterances and texts are informed by and characterized by structures from other functions. From Sebeok in particular, Britton took the position that the poetic function of language went wider than that deemed to be poetry:

Any attempt to reduce the sphere of poetic function to poetry or to confine poetry to poetic function would be a delusive oversimplification. Poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant, determining function, whereas in all other verbal activities it acts as a subsidiary, accessory constituent (Sebeok 1960; cited in Britton 1982, p. 62)

So how can we understand the ‘poetic function’ of language?

One of Britton’s earliest distinctions was between language in the spectator role and language in the participant role (1963). Participant role was characterized by language intended to recount or describe an event or past experience in order to get the listener-reader to do something or to change their opinion. Spectator role was characterized by language intended purely to interest or excite the listener-reader, representing events or past experiences in language for their own sake. Britton argued
that spectator role was not only confined to self-consciously literary discourse but also featured in non-literary discourse such as anecdote. At the time of making this distinction, Britton cited Suzanne Langer’s work on symbolization but he later found support in the work of British psychologist D.W. Harding (1937) who had already distinguished between the onlooker role and the participant role. Harding prompted Britton to consider the role of attention and evaluation in the listener/reader’s perception of language-in-use.

Britton related the spectator role to the findings of the empirical study he made of children’s writing. Examination of the writing samples produced three main categories: **transactional** (getting things done, in the participant role); **expressive** (articulation of emotion and first-hand experience, where the participant and spectator roles are mixed); and **poetic** (where, to use his formulation, we are ‘making something with language rather than doing something with it’; it was poetic discourse that met the demands of the spectator role).

The intention of making something with language suggested to Britton that the use of language would become more ‘organised’, more crafted to be complex (at a symbolic level) and it was from this interest in the organization of language that he came to the stylistics of Henry Widdowson (1975). Widdowson identified three organizational patterns at work in texts that set out to be literary: phonological (e.g. metre and rhyme); syntactic (e.g. parallel structures); and ‘patterns formed by semantic links between individual lexical items’ (e.g. puns). Britton, after Widdowson, suggested that the patterning created in self-consciously poetic language use (patterning of sound, syntax and meaning) went ‘over and above’ the everyday pattern of **communication**. Use of the systems of patterning drew attention to the language as a kind of invitation to take up the spectator role. Britton suggested (perhaps playfully) that poetry could therefore be considered ‘deviant discourse’ in that it drew attention, stylistically, to how it differs from non-literary discourse. Its deviancy, for Britton, was that poetry draws attention to how it works as communication and ‘**drawing-attention-to-itself**’ was a characteristic of language in the poetic mode.

Again, Britton comes back to Langer (1967) and her distinction between discursive and presentational symbolism, between a ‘message encoded in a symbol system’ and a message encoded in a unique complex symbol’ (p. 65) to illustrate the different ways in which language is used in the poetic function, the ‘deviant’ display of the symbol system as symbol; **the self-conscious patterning to draw attention to its difference from everyday discourse as well as encoding meaning**. There are many examples of the poetic function in everyday utterances wider than poetry per se. Football songs and some stand-up comedy use language characteristic of the poetic function. Carol Fox (1993), in her landmark study of young children’s oral storytelling, argued that the poetic (metaphoric) was a major part of their language from the outset and, in doing so, she argued with Halliday (1973) who did not assign much importance to the poetic function in the process of developing adult language. Fox’s study raises the important question as to why children seem to have such a strong need for the poetic at the inception of language itself. Her argument, somewhat similar to Langer’s, was that
the poetic function, rather than being the icing on the cake, is the cake itself. **The poetic function of language meets the human need to symbolize.**

The two perspectives discussed here point to a working definition of poetry, although they are clearly not the whole story. What they can help us to capture are the uses of speech and writing regarded as poetic; Gibson’s, Cole’s and Britton’s work encourage us to move away from an understanding of the poetic as a transcendental category of language and they can liberate us (if we need liberating) from a view of poetry as a cultural judgment passed down from on high. Instead, they can help us focus on the potential or the affordances of a text for meaning-making and on the relationship between meaning-making and the self-conscious organizational patterning of language. At the heart of this relationship is the role the reader/listener is invited to take up in perceiving and apprehending the poem as a cultural artefact – the spectator role. The deviance of poetic discourse derives from its self-conscious drawing-attention-to-itself in the course of communicating. The poetic function of language is ubiquitous in human communication but the category of language-use we describe as poetry is defined by its self-conscious effort to draw attention (through sound, syntax and patterns of meaning) to its symbolic nature.

**What are the perceived uses of poetry?**

Throughout history, the value of poetry has been debated in terms ranging from the social to the individual, from the strictly moral to the hedonistic, and from ideas of the individual’s psychological health to those of collective unity.

The instructive potential of poetry was expressed by Horace in his famous maxim that the function of poetry is simultaneously to delight and to offer the reader “some useful precepts for life” (Dorsch, 1972: 90). Indeed, poetry was seen as the best medium for the communication of moral, scientific, and religious ideas, and was thus the form of choice for many classical philosophers (Russell, 2004: 61).

Poetry was also recognised as having a particular aptitude for persuasion. Cicero systematised techniques of verbal ornamentation that constituted the ‘informing, winning, and moving’ effects of ‘eloquence’ (Olmsted, 2006: 25), and this new rhetorical theory, which highlighted the importance of style and argumentation, became the framework for much debate about the poetry’s persuasive power. Philip Sidney later defended the importance of poetry in language borrowed from Cicero, arguing that the stylistic ‘delight’ of poetry encourages readers to accept important moral lessons which they may otherwise ignore (Sidney, 1989: 217-8).

Poetry has been perceived to have an essential ethical importance. Literary theorists of the twentieth century, such as F.R. Leavis, saw poetry to be inherently moral – protecting everything that was humane in an increasingly mechanized world – and its engaged and serious study to be a predominantly moral enterprise (Eagleton, 1996: 29). Poetry’s ethical value has also been seen in the idea of the ‘imagination’ as a pedagogical tool, with which one can experience the perspective of the other in a way
that does not negate the differences in their identity (Spivak, 2004). The poetic imagination, in its awareness of things incomprehensible, becomes a tool to train one to inhabit a multicultural world with tolerance and respect, and not to recoil with hostility to something one does not understand.

Other theorists have found in poetry not merely the means to communicate moral lessons, but the actual **origin of these morals** themselves. P.B. Shelley famously claimed that poets were ‘the unacknowledged legislators of the world’, in response to what he saw as their eminent imaginative, receptive, and perceptive talents (Shelley, 1926: 329). It is in poetry, he argued, that beauty and goodness are first identified and articulated, and it is consequently poetry that constitutes the ethical foundations of laws and social mores. With rather more restraint, other critics have also found in poetry the formative bases of **collective identity**. Benedict Anderson identified the use of the vernacular language and the printing press as key factors in the construction of nationhood (1983), but poetry specifically can be seen to be responsible for the creation of national symbols and emblems (Bawcutt, 1992: 95; Brown, 2004; Tappan, 1914).

Rather than treating it as the source of social belief in the way claimed by Shelley, theorists such as Northrop Frye have seen poetry as a medium that **articulates, maintains, and reinforces shared values and ideologies**. Frye identifies it as the ‘central part’ of a mythic structure that includes ‘religion, philosophy, political theory’, and which presents ‘the vision a society has of its situation’ (Frye, 2009: 254). Poetry, and literature more widely, thus plays a key role in expressing a society’s understanding of its own ‘situation, destiny, and ideals’. It can also be said to express what that society desires to be, offering a space in which social reality can be idealised and improved.

Poetry can respond to **specific historical events**. It is often either celebratory, satirical, or written in protest (Preminger et al, 1975: 970-972), and in these different respects, it can be seen to contain various tangible political functions. Poetry can offer a channel for a creative, oblique, and ultimately humane response, in praise or criticism, to a political situation or historical moment. Tony Harrison’s V, for example, presents a real, empathetic, and personal consideration of the closure of the mines in Leeds. By containing the emotional alongside the political, poetry develops the relationship between the individual and society, and acknowledges what Lionel Trilling has called the importance of ‘values in the realm beyond politics’ (in Preminger et al, 1975: 972), those values shared between cultures and societies.

Psychologists have argued that poetry can create in an individual, both the reader and the writer, a condition of **psychological health and well-being**. Sigmund Freud conceived of art in terms of wish-fulfilment, as a space in which one can indulge one’s repressed desires; as ‘health-giving’ space between reality and dream (Preminger et al, 1993: 393). In this respect, the Aristotelian sense of poetry as catharsis, for both the poet and its audience, is maintained (Dorsch, 1972). It has also been thought that the reading of poetry can be used as an actual means of psychotherapy, as it ‘evokes moods and provides models for dealing with them’ (Leedy, in Preminger et al, 1975: 976). It is poetry’s ‘consolatory, homiletic qualities’ that are relied on for this practice, its combination of ethics and emotion, and the inter-personal relationships that it emulates.
As well as teaching one to develop individually and engage with others, poetry’s value, as psychologists and theorists from other disciplines have found, is in the very fact of its self-conscious removal from the social world. Freud believed that ‘the real pleasure in artistic form comes from illogic and nonsense... [from an] alleviation from the pressure of reason’ (Holland, 1966: 29). Art here becomes a space in which there is possible a certain creative or imaginative freedom liberated from the social obligations to common sense and rationality. Furthermore, poetry specifically, in its non-chronological form and immediacy of expression, has been identified as being free of the strictures of linear narrative form, and so encourages mental restraint and the unhurried appreciation of the present (Constantine, 2013: 63). John Keats formulated this notion with the idea of negative capability, which identifies in poetry the rejection of the common pursuit of taxonomical knowledge, and the embracing of ‘uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts’ (Keats, 1899: 277), to allow greater sympathy with another subject (Baldick, 2008: 221). The philosopher J.S. Mill defined poetry as necessarily dependent upon this rejection of social belief and obligation. For Mill, as poetry is engaged in a constant process of ‘confessing itself to itself’ (2002), it is supremely self-indulgent, but positively, productively so. This idea of an essentially asocial poetry has been used to argue for a poetry completely free of all obligation (Constantine, 2013). In this respect, poetry has been thought to be a form which declares the inherent value of its own lack of utility.

Finally, the idea of poetry as inherently and simply pleasurable or delightful has not been ignored (Dorsch, 1972: 90; Sidney, 1989; Johnson, 1765). This pleasure might come from what David Constantine has called the ‘alertness and agility’ of intellectual engagement required by the complexity of poetic language (2013: 63), from its ‘physical grace’ and its verbal euphony (Pinsky, 1983: 3), or from the delight of the message that it conveys.

**Poetry and lifelong learning**

The perceived role of poetry in lifelong learning and development today reflects some of the ambiguity of the above perceptions of the definition and function of poetry. The value of poetry in learning and development is often taken for granted: assumptions about the necessity of formative encounters with ‘great’ literature overlap with anecdotal evidence about the transformative power of stories. Crucially, poetry’s role in different stages of lifelong learning has hitherto been discussed and valued in very separate ways: there remains a dearth of clear evidence about its educational value, and a lack of joined-up research into its roles at different stages of people’s development. Poetry education in primary schools has, over the last decade, been heavily influenced by the literacy agenda, emphasising knowledge of language techniques, textual forms and generic structures (Department for Education, 2006). In exam-oriented secondary education, these cognitive and analytical aspects of poetry remain dominant (Hennessy and Mcnamara 2011, Dymoke 2001). Outside mainstream education, though, are reports of beneficial uses of poetry in psychological and therapeutic settings from dementia, depression and schizophrenia treatment to prisons and caring for the elderly (Kidd et al 2011, Gregory 2011, Reiter 2010, Heimes 2011, Shafi 2010). These tend to
focus on the affective qualities of poetry, and its capacity for self-expression, usually through the creation of new poetry (Olson-McBride and Page 2012; Jocson 2006). The research insights of each domain, however, remain largely separate.

The make-up of our team of researchers initially reflected – and sought to redress – this disjuncture in the way that poetry is valued. Researchers of English Literature in the team (Rumbold and Williams) had traced the way that popular eighteenth- and nineteenth-century anthologies and quotation books – which organized ‘useful’ and ‘beautiful’ poetic excerpts under headings – ascribed values of usefulness and self-knowledge to poetry. They shaped the assumption that contact with great works of literature brings ethical and moral benefits, and their use in schools helped to institutionalise those values in education. As our education expert was aware, such ethical values for poetry persist in education today, despite the dominance of the cognitive demands of close reading and technical analysis in the study of poetry (Ellis).

By contrast, therapeutic practitioners (Howells) have used the affective qualities of poetry to work with groups from displaced communities to head injury patients, and their anecdotal evidence suggests that poetry can enable individuals to process emotional and psychological trauma, often drawing on poems remembered from childhood; while our research fellow (Simecek), with a background in the Philosophy of Literature, was interested in the moral effects of poetry on its readers, via its form, structure and style. Learning by heart has been largely rejected in schools, but drama professionals (Bessell) see it as a pre-condition to actors’ understanding and communication; and psychological research (Riddell, Rathbone) has begun to quantify the self-reflective role of learned poetry in autobiographical memory and identity formation. The purpose of our project, then, was not simply to borrow legimating methods from one another’s disciplines, but to find ways of synthesising our approaches to a shared cultural object with a view to gaining a more complete sense of its potential value, and developing ways of talking about that value that made sense to a wider audience, as well as to each individual discipline.

**Aims and objectives of the ‘Uses of Poetry’ project**

Our project sought to review existing research evidence across a number of disciplines, and across the arts and humanities and sciences, for the value of engaging with poetry; and to develop innovative interdisciplinary methodologies for measuring and articulating the benefits of poetry in lifelong learning and development. It brought together researchers and practitioners from literature, education, drama, creative writing, philosophy and cognitive and developmental psychology to:

a) collate and critically evaluate existing evidence from their respective disciplines about the perceived value of engaging with poetry;

b) reassess through seminar discussion the effectiveness of existing research methods (qualitative and quantitative data; historical research; practice-based evidence) for capturing people’s ‘experiences’ of poetry;
c) combine insights and techniques from their respective disciplines in order to identify new potential interdisciplinary measures of poetry’s value, and pilot those measurement techniques at practical workshops, and in ancillary investigations such as surveys, questionnaires and interviews.

d) explore the potential value of older pedagogical practices such as learning by heart as a means of connecting the cognitive and affective values of engaging with poetry, currently divided across mainstream education and psychological and therapeutic settings.

The chief aims of this six-month research process were not simply to develop new measures of the value of poetry, but also to find new ways of talking across disciplines in order to bring together very different perceptions of poetry’s role and benefits in society. Much of the design of our project was focussed on identifying techniques for facilitating a successful cross-disciplinary conversation, which, as our plans for future collaboration attest (see below), was one of the most significant outcomes of the project.

Planning and designing our research

The project was managed by the PI, Dr Kate Rumbold, with the support of co-investigators, Prof. Patricia Riddell and Prof. Viv Ellis, and supported by a research fellow, Karen Simecek, recruited shortly before the beginning of the project. We structured our six-month project around a central series of three day-long research seminars for all eight members of the project team. These seminars provided regular opportunities for each team member to reflect critically on the benefits and limitations of their disciplinary approaches to (or assumptions about) the value of poetry; and to work collaboratively to identify potential new research methods.

Our first session, in December, was designed to introduce the team members to one another, to encourage each participant to explain their disciplinary perspective to colleagues from different backgrounds; to begin to reflect critically on our existing approaches; and to start to identify collectively some potential new ways of working together. We planned that, having identified key issues for further investigation during the first session, cross-disciplinary pairs or groups of colleagues would research these further and report back with tentative plans of methods for testing them at the second seminar. Our second session, in January, was designed to crystallise these exploratory new ways of working, by developing research hypotheses, and agreeing ways of testing them that combined our different methodological expertise.

We envisaged in our original proposal that we would test our new methods at a community event, the exact nature of which, because of the exploratory nature of the project, would be confirmed as it became clear exactly what the group needed to test. As it happened, we were able to stay remarkably close to our vision of live workshops in which participants engaged in poetry reading and learning by heart activities, enabling both immediate participant reflection, and observation of attitudes and group dynamics. The demographic of the event shifted away from schoolchildren, but still drew on a cross-generational community of younger and older adults.
Our inter-disciplinary research seminars

Seminar 1: University of Oxford, December 2013

Our opening seminar was held at St Peter’s College, University of Oxford in December 2013, and all eight members of the project research team took part. In order to facilitate productive conversation, all team members were asked to circulate in advance their responses to a simple set of questions that captured their current position on the value of poetry; and to share a poem that, to them, had particular meaning and value. The results were displayed at the meeting to enable colleagues quickly to gain insight into one another’s perspectives. Rumbold’s introduction outlined the overall project aims, but stressed the exploratory nature of the research, and its potential to respond to the interests and expertise of everyone in the group.

Team members, only some of whom had met before, were introduced through a ‘speed-dating’ exercise, in which pairs of team members were put together in conversation for 10 minutes, to discuss their areas of interest and expertise, with their answers to the simple pre-seminar questions as a prompt for discussion. This was an important way not only of encountering a range of perspectives on the topic, but of requiring all members to articulate their own disciplinary and personal perspectives to other people: it constituted the first step in an important process of peer and self-evaluation of our existing approaches to the value of poetry.

This process of reflection was continued when Karen Simecek, the project Research Fellow, presented the initial stage of a literature review of existing measures of, and articulations of, the value of engaging with poetry. Since the review was initially guided by the project management team, its primary focus was in literature, education and psychology: presenting it to the wider group led to the identification of further potential gaps in the research. Importantly, the literature review was organised not by disciplinary approach, but by emerging themes: the value of story telling and narrative; of voice and the experience language; the affective value of poetry; importance of experience; living, sharing and the commonplace. The gaps identified by this and the subsequent stages of the literature review are discussed below.

Our first whole-group discussion drew together our emerging ideas: it explored the range of different audiences and readers for poetry; the relationship between the personal or private response and the shared experience of engaging with poetry; the relationship between measurement and value; the relationship between the technical understanding of a poem and an emotional response; the barriers to engaging with poetry, and the cultural status attached to poetry that might obscure other values and uses. By the end of the discussion, we had identified four key issues relating to the values of engaging with poetry, and four cross-disciplinary pairs of team members to take them forward.

1. **Autobiography and memory**: Emma, Clare (with input from Abigail)
2. **Embodiment and Performance**: Jaq, Tricia (with input from Viv and Kate)
3. **Relationship between the individual and community**: Viv, Abigail (with input from Clare and Karen)
4. **Applied poetry**: Karen, Kate (with input from Jaq and Tricia)
Pairs were invited to consider before the next meeting the assumed values of poetry in their respective area; how we could test them; and what measurements we could use. We also identified the importance of establishing what made poetry distinct from other kinds of literary forms or modes of reading; Ellis and Williams explored this question through historical literary definitions and contemporary theories of reading.

Seminar 2: Henley Business School, University of Reading, January 2014

At our second workshop, in January, the collaborative pairs reported back on their investigations. Through whole group discussion, we developed their initial impressions into formal research questions, hypotheses and planned experiments that were ready, with some further refinements, to pilot with a wider audience (see experiments, below). We also heard an update on the literature review, now organised around the four focal areas of the project, and identified a number of insights from existing research in these areas (see below).

Practical workshops

Between the second and third seminars, we secured ethics approval for, and piloted, a number of our experiments, first with students in our institutions, and then with members of the wider public, including at a poetry study day that we held at the Shakespeare Institute, Stratford-upon-Avon, on 1 April 2014 (see below for details under each individual experiment).

Seminar 3: Department of Psychology, University of Reading, April 2014

At our final seminar, the team reflected on their initial observations from our pilot experiments. We had agreed, given the scope of the project, that our experiments would be tests of principle, rather than large data-gathering exercises, so we discussed both the validity of, and insights gained from, each individual experiment, and what might be needed to repeat, refine or scale up each one. This final formal meeting was also an opportunity to confirm our plans for publishing in a special issue of a journal, and to plan future extensions of the project (see outputs and future directions).

Alongside the series of seminars, we identified a number of researchers currently working in important related areas, including in the AHRC Cultural Value Project. We arranged to meet with them to discuss their approaches and techniques. Simecek attended a workshop on Shakespeare as part of Peter Lamarque and Gregory Currie’s project, ‘Cognitive and Aesthetic Values in Cultural Artefacts’; and Rumbold and Simecek visited Liverpool to talk with Philip Davis and Josie Billington about their project ‘Assessing the intrinsic value, and health and well-being benefits, for individual and community, of The Reader Organisation’s Volunteer Reader Scheme’. We were keen to find out whether Davis and Billington had observed that poetry, as opposed to prose, had any distinctive qualities that might affect people’s emotional responses; what techniques they used to measure the benefits of reading groups; and whether
preconceptions about literature affected the results. We learned more about their technique of video-recording their reading group discussions and scrutinising them for ‘breakthroughs’ or turning points in the discussion, e.g. moments of insight, or a changed level of engagement with the text; and we gathered that poetry had been used particularly successfully with dementia patients, not least because it required less advance preparation and recall to achieve its effects.

**Key insights from the literature review**

Alongside our seminar series, our research fellow, Karen Simecek, conducted an extensive, inter-disciplinary literature review. The full review is available on our project blog (http://usesofpoetry.wordpress.com/bibliography/), but the main gaps that we identified in the existing literature on the value of poetry are as follows. Existing studies of poetry:

--tend to take for granted **what poetry is.** Some psychological literature bypasses definitions of poetry in order to focus on poetic features such as metaphor.

--do not ask or explore **what it is about the poem** as a literary work – its form, style and content, for example – that contributes to the perceived benefits.

--emphasise above all the benefits of **narrative and story-telling**, even though psychological evidence suggests that other formal features of poetry, such as rhythm and rhyme, are important in people’s development.

--focus on the **benefits of writing poetry**, rather than of the experience of reading it.

Our experiments accordingly attempted to address these gaps in a number of ways.

**The research experiments**

1. **Embodiment and Performance** (led by Prof. Patricia Riddell, Psychology; Dr Jaq Bessell, Drama)

   This experiment was designed to gauge the connection between physical movement and the ability to commit poetry to memory; and thus explored a technique of enhancing an encounter with poetry and maximising its value. The experiment was founded in a combination of practice-based insights from drama, and psychological theory. Acting requires that the actor both learn the dialogue for their character and incorporate this into action on stage. Anecdotally, it appears that, when learning dialogue precedes learning the movement on stage, actors can freeze while they recall the dialogue. Thus, it appears that there is a period during which the dialogue and action become integrated.

   By contrast, there is anecdotal evidence that when participants are encouraged to put a movement to a poem that they are learning, the learning is assisted. It appears, then, that movement might be an integral part of the process of learning dialogue and
therefore could be used to assist in this process. If movement is integral, it might suggest that actors would benefit from learning dialogue and action in combination rather than separately.

Indications for why this might be come from the literature on embodied cognition. The premise of embodied cognition is that ‘Biological brains are first and foremost the control systems for biological bodies. Biological bodies move and act in rich real-world surroundings’ (Clark, 1998, p. 506). This reframes the mind and cognitive function as having developed as a means to control action rather than as a means to create thought and therefore suggests that thought might be based in action. Indeed, some theories make no separation between organism and environment. It has therefore been suggested that both online cognition (processing as we move through the world) and offline cognition (processing that we do through reflection) might be body based (Wilson, 2002).

Glenberg (1997) reviewed the function of memory and argued that our memory for the environment was dependent on both the structure of the environment and the structure of our bodies. He noted that this framework had the potential to solve an outstanding problem in cognitive psychology, namely how we translate between arbitrary symbols (such as words) and their meaning. If meaning is based in the structure of objects and the actions they afford, then the connection between the symbol and its meaning can be coded through this representation. In this framework, memory for poetry or lines in a play would be enhanced by providing a structure through action. It is possible that the link between structure and meaning does not require actual movement, but only the representation of movement. In this case, imagining a movement would have the same effect as actually performing the movement. However, it is also possible that stronger associations are made when the movement is performed.

To test their hypotheses, Riddell and Bessell proposed comparing participants’ ability to learn a new poem across three conditions:

1. Participants are given a poem to learn and asked to do this by copying the poem out. This provides a control for action but ensures that the action is not related to the structure of the content.
2. Participants are given a poem to learn and are asked to form movements that represent the content.
3. Participants are given a poem to learn and are asked to imagine movements that represent the content.

To determine the relative efficacy of the methods, they proposed to measure the number of lines correctly recalled by participants in each condition. They predicted that participants who act out the poem would remember more than those that write out the poem; and that it was also possible that participants who imagined movements related to the poem would remember more than those in the writing condition.
The experiment was pre-piloted with Bessell’s students at the Guildford School of Acting, and then piloted with members of the public at our WWI poetry study day in Stratford-upon-Avon (see below).

2. Applied poetry: cognition and affect (Dr Kate Rumbold, English, and Dr Karen Simecek, Philosophy)

This experiment arose out of our collaborative investigation of the wide range of practical applications for which poetry is used, in the UK and around the world. Reading about these applications, from prison work to community reading groups, raised questions such as:

--what is it about poetry that brings these benefits? Is it an unusual encounter with language; an interaction with another’s experience; the facilitation of discussion on an important topic; or a ‘local habitation and a name’, or a place or focus for one’s thoughts (as opposed to the objectless nature of e.g. depression).

--how would these benefits differ from those associated with prose, or other kinds of text or cultural object?

--how can we detach the benefits of engaging with poetry from the other benefits of positive social interaction in a group setting?

In our exploration of a range of poetry projects, we noticed that cognitive and affective responses to poetry constituted two very different starting points for encounters with poetry. For example, poetry groups in the medical profession were designed to help General Practitioners to develop their empathic skills (affect), but they reached this point by starting their discussion with an analytical or cognitive approach to the poems (Abse, Horowitz). Conversely, the US-based National Association of Poetry Therapy describes how its practitioners ‘prescribe’ clients a poem that resonates with their own emotional state (affective), and, by doing so, enable them to take a more detached and reflective stance towards their predicament (cognitive) (Mazza; National Association of Poetry Therapy). Different modes of applied poetry, then, might declaredly start with a cognitive or affective approach, but ultimately arrive, without acknowledgement, at the other.

This is an intriguing, but as yet unspoken, link between affect and cognition, which otherwise appear to be separated between the realms of poetry therapy and mainstream education. Neuroscience says that cognitive and affective functions are not distinguished by differing brain processes but by how they manifest in experience (Duncan and Barrett). Psychological research on the relationship between affect and attention further promotes this connection between affect and cognition (LaBar and Cabeza). Attention is a paradigmatic cognitive process and there is evidence to suggest that our affective processes can increase attention (see Pessoa), demonstrating a connection between the cognitive and affective. Also, there is evidence that certain affective states are useful in helping us to deal with complex thoughts (see Andrews and Thomson). Duncan and Barrett suggest that where core affect is intensified or disrupted – ie. unbalanced – this can cause various mental health conditions. This research
suggests a potential value for poetry in linking much more explicitly the cognitive and affective dimensions of literature; and even at the potential benefits of a kind of literature that can help people to balance these affective and cognitive modes.

Our research question, then, was: **does encouraging affective engagement increase cognitive understanding, and vice versa?** We proposed to test this by testing in a seminar-style discussion whether promoting affective engagement (by a focus on the feelings triggered by reading a poem) can lead to an enhanced cognitive understanding; and whether promoting cognitive engagement (by a focus on readers’ intellectual responses) can lead to an enhanced affective engagement.

We proposed to measure, through pre- and post-discussion testing, the range of themes identified by the participants, the incorporation of the poem’s language into their own speech, the connections made by participants between the technical qualities of language and their emotional meaning, and their level of emotional response; and we predicted a heightened engagement with the language, and an enhanced ability to analyse the effects of those language features. We designed a set of questions that would lead participants through both cognitive and affective responses to the poem. Half of the questions, generated by Rumbold, were typical of the cognitive-oriented questions used in university settings to develop students’ close reading skills (e.g. ‘What did you find striking about the language of the poem?’; ‘How would you characterise the different stanzas?’; ‘What is the effect of the rhyme scheme?’). The other half of the questions, informed by Howell, were of the kind used in therapeutic settings, and affective in orientation (e.g. ‘How does this poem make you feel?’; ‘What emotions does the poem evoke?’; ‘Can you relate personally to a poem about war, written in 1916?’)

We then framed the discussion with two word association and word completion tests (developed out of the findings of a music experiment that tested for affective scale and mood before and after hearing music (Gfeller, Asmus and Eckert), and a study which evaluated a number of ways of measuring mood covertly (DeWall and Baumeister, 2007)). We audio-recorded and transcribed the discussion in order to analyse the language of the group for ‘breakthrough’ moments, and for evidence of a relationship between affective responses and cognitive insights (based on Van den Broek et al’s analysis of language use as a measure of comprehension, 2001).

To test our word association exercises, and get an initial sense of the affective orientation of a group engaged in cognitive-oriented discussion of poetry, we pre-piloted our psychological questionnaires with three groups of third-year undergraduate students of English Literature at the University of Birmingham. After a timetabled one-hour seminar, led by Rumbold, on William Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* – a university seminar that was typically cognitive in its approach to the play – volunteer students completed a set of word-association questionnaires with Simecek, to gauge their orientation.

To test our questions, we then recruited a small group of volunteer undergraduate English students interested in poetry from all year groups. We identified a poem for discussion, namely ‘The Dancers’, by Edith Sitwell (1916); led students through our proposed series of questions, cognitive and affective; and tested the students with questionnaires before and after the seminar to gauge their affective
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orientation. The seminar was transcribed by the research fellow, and coded for understanding of the poem, and for turning points in the discussion. This seminar led us to adjust slightly the sequence of questions in advance of our public seminar, in order to establish whether starting a discussion with more affectively oriented questions could lead to deeper cognitive responses, e.g. articulating how the poem made them feel, and then pinpointing exactly what it was about the language, or the syntax, or the rhyme scheme, that generated those emotional effects.

Finally, we piloted the experiment with the wider public under the auspices of a free World War I Poetry event that we designed for the purpose at the Shakespeare Institute. We chose a World War I theme to enhance recruitment, given its topicality in the anniversary year of 2014, and to attract participants beyond those with a direct interest in poetry, including, for example, local groups of historians. Our experiment ran concurrently with the ‘embodiment’ experiment, amidst a series of talks from historians and literature experts, poetry readings, book and poster displays, and afternoon tea. We ran the experiment twice, with two different groups of approximately 10-12 adults, and audio-recorded and transcribed the discussion.

Poetry and autobiographical memory (Dr Clare Rathbone, Psychology, and Emma Howell, therapeutic poetry-reading and creative writing)

This experiment centres on the premise that poetry can help people deal with traumatic events (through structured remembering), but also help to recall and remember positive life experiences. Memories are an important feature in how we develop our sense of self; and linking our sense of self in the present with our sense of self in the past helps us to strengthen our sense of self overall.

What is the role of poetry in this kind of autobiographical memory? This experiment builds on an online survey of over 100 people previously conducted by Dr Clare Rathbone on the relationship between poetry and autobiographical memory. Her initial data revealed that people were most likely to have positive associations with poems if they had been introduced to them by family or friends, rather than in an educational setting; and more likely to draw comfort from them if they had been learned by heart; if they had read the poems frequently in the last ten years, both of these qualities were increased. Furthermore, the study showed the majority of poems recalled by participants were remembered from around the age of 15 (and between 15 and 30 more widely): a ‘bump of reminiscence’ in the data that suggests this is a period of particularly vivid memories and associations with poetry (even without taking into account poems encountered at school).

The new questionnaire that Clare proposed, and that we refined together as a team, had a more comparative function, allowing us to measure people’s memories of poetry, and the associations they bear, against other kinds of text such as novels, and to test whether poetry has a potentially unique role in shaping people’s memories. The questionnaire incorporated a ‘centrality of events’ scale, which asked respondents to rate the significance of the poem and its associated memories in terms of the person’s positive feelings, their life experiences, and their sense of self. It included questions, as
before, about the age at which the memory was formed, the source of the poem, what they remembered about it, its personal significance (individually and socially), and the intensity of the emotional association; and it included space for open-ended responses about the poem’s role and value in people’s lives and in society more widely.

What is distinctive about the effects of reading poetry? Prof. Viv Ellis (Education) and Dr Abigail Williams (English)

This experiment sought to examine the value of an encounter with poetry as opposed to different kinds of texts, literary and otherwise. It arose from the observation that sense-making is intrinsically social and cultural: we make personal meaning through resources available culturally and socially. A poem is a mediating artefact between individual and community, but how is it different from other kinds of artefact?

In the chapter ‘Two Modes of Thought’ in Actual Minds Possible Worlds, Jerome Bruner details an experiment in which he compared James Joyce’s 113-line short story ‘Clay’ (from the 1914 collection Dubliners) with an academic text of the same length on the subject of rituals. Bruner observed that Joyce’s text featured substantially more ‘transformations’ than the academic text. A ‘simple transformation’ is defined as a way of saying something that ‘transform[s] the action of verb from being a fait accompli to being psychologically in process, and as such contingent or subjunctive’. e.g. x hopes/is keen/must/intends/starts to commit a crime. A ‘complex transformation’ is one that alters a sentence ‘by adding to it a verb phrase [which indicates a state of mental activity] that modifies the main verb phrase’, e.g. x pretends/learns/imagine/foresees/ thinks he has committed a crime.

In Bruner’s experiment, participants were asked to read Joyce’s ‘Clay’ and then to re-tell the story in their own words, creating a ‘virtual text’ of their own. The experiment gauged the extent to which the reader picked up on the subjunctivized speech in the story by incorporating subjunctivized language into their retelling (e.g. telling the story from a character’s perspective), and thus reproducing the story’s transformations in their virtual text.

We hypothesised that poetry, even more so than prose fiction, has the potential to facilitate the subjunctification of experience, and thus the ability to hold in mind multiple possibilities, perspectives, and indeterminacies. In our version of Bruner’s experiment, then, poetry sits alongside the short story of the original investigation, and an newspaper story, to facilitate comparison not just between literature and other texts, but between different kinds of literature.

We designed an experiment that could be delivered through one-on-one interviews with Ellis, in a café-style setting (i.e. in private in public), with a small total number of participants. After reading a poem, short story and newspaper text to the participant, the interviewer will ask a number of simple, standardised questions to elicit their understanding and invite them to recall the content and meaning. The interviews would be audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed for the complexity of the language used, as a measure of higher order thinking. This would include paying attention to
- Sentence length
- If/then conjunctives
- Adverbial phrases

in order to gauge the extent to which the language of the poem informed the participant’s response – and potentially changed their perspective – in ways that the other texts did not.

**Observations from the pilot experiments**

**Embodiment and performance**

In the pre-pilot version of the experiment with a sample of 27 drama students at the Guildford School of Acting, no significant difference was found between the various conditions with regard to the percentage of lines correctly recalled. Whether writing, imagining or embodying the poem or the images within the poem, the participants recalled 100% or very close to 100% of the poem in each instance. This was, however, a cohort very practised in memorisation techniques, and not necessarily reflective of the response of the wider public.

In the pre-pilot, it also appeared that the time allocated for the experiment – 5 minutes of memorisation activity – was rather more than was necessary for this particular group. We suspected that 3 minutes, rather than 5 minutes, would have provided a better benchmark time against which to compare memorisation methods. This was because almost all participants opted to memorise the same short poem, and 5 minutes gave room for several iterations of the same activity.

We documented participants’ comments on the process, and some observations emerged: one participant noted that her preferred memorisation method was to sing the lines: in other words, reciting aloud to a given or improvised tune. Another commented that, though he had not been able to visualise imaginary movements, he had been able to create a very detailed visual image in his mind, a sort of ‘video’ corresponding to the narrative of the poem. He added that he found this more vivid and effective than other methods he had tried before.

When taking the same experiment to our public event in Stratford-upon-Avon, we asked a group of 13 adults to memorise the poem using the same techniques as the GSA students. We reduced the time allowed to 3 minutes per participant and activity. This time the results varied considerably.

--the group embodying the images within the poem recalled 100% of the lines
--the group asked to write out the lines of the poem recalled the next highest percentage of the lines, on average.
--the group asked to imagine movements recalled the lowest percentage overall.

We were surprised that that the writing group scored relatively highly. We wondered whether the cohort – several of whom, because of the university location, were students of literature – were so adept in taking in visual information from print
sources, and so used to the act of writing (note-taking, etc) that the copying experiment played to existing natural /cultivated memorisation habits. We also wondered, however, whether the mechanical activity of copying out lines was in itself a sufficiently embodied activity to constitute something of a physical engagement with the poem.

We were surprised by comments from the Stratford group which suggested that it was ‘almost impossible’ to separate the activity of reading and visualising (in the case of those either copying or embodying) and many agreed that they were not able to focus on a single memorisation strategy to the exclusion of those which they knew already to be successful for them.

The conclusions we drew from the two groups were as follows:

1. Age could be a significant factor in determining how appropriate or successful a single memorisation strategy could be.
2. The GSA students, young actors in training, were more practised in working with a single method in isolation.
3. The Stratford group, generally much older PG students or retired persons, instinctively used a range of methods.
4. The abbreviated time allowed for memorisation in the Stratford experiment revealed great variance, suggesting that physicalized text is the quickest to be fully memorised, but the margin was less significant than we had expected.
5. Writing is a familiar activity associated with memorisation in both groups, and cannot be regarded as non-physical engagement.

We propose to devise a second round of experiments, to be conducted by a larger cohort, which will test the participants’ abilities to recall a poem in a brief period of time (3 minutes) but which will contrast physical, embodied approaches to memorisation, with aural/vocal approaches to the same. The third group will simply read the poem for 3 minutes, without copying out or reading aloud. We expect we will see a higher percentage of lines recalled in the groups not confined to silent reading, but whether singing or physicalizing produces the best results overall is still to be determined. We would also like to test the effectiveness of these different techniques for immediate and for delayed recall.

**Applied poetry: cognition and affect**

We found that participants, when encouraged to think about their emotional responses to the poem, made inferences about the meaning of the poem based on these responses. We did, therefore, see an enhancement of comprehension which appears to be connected to encouragement to take seriously one’s response to the poem: in other words, that encouraging an affective engagement with the poem deepened the cognitive engagement. For example, after expressing their first impression that ‘The Dancers’ was entirely satirical and critical about people at home’s privileged indifference to the horror of battle, one participant, encouraged to think how the poem relates to them personally,
reflected empathetically on her friend’s experience of having a close relative at war in Afghanistan. She then returned to the poem to notice evidence that it was also compassionate about how people at home have to behave in order to cope with the trauma of having loved ones in combat overseas. We thus observed that engaging emotionally with the poem helped students to nuance their analysis, and to see the complexity and ambiguity of the poem.

It was also striking how often, after the more affective-oriented questions, participants returned to the text of the poem and brought lines in to the discussion, in some cases taking up the words as their own. Since this high level of student engagement with the text is much sought after in formal education, it was interesting to reflect on what facilitated it. In my own university teaching, I have repeatedly – and with mixed success – exhorted students not simply to identify features of the language of a text, but also to say what they thought the effect of that feature might be. In this experiment, we reversed the direction of this approach. By starting with a consideration of the effects of the poem on the reader – stemming from ‘how does it make you feel?’ – students then seemed much more readily able (and willing) to trace the causes of these effects to certain words, phrases or formal patterns.

We noticed that half of the participants in the public discussions showed a significant increase in the emotional connections they made in the word association task at the end of the seminar compared to the test they took at the beginning, suggesting that the discussion had increased their affective orientation. Sharing an emotional response to a poem was, however, not necessarily a natural or instinctive behaviour on the part of participants. The student pre-pilot group were initially much more comfortable with taking an analytical approach to the poem; and we noticed in both the student and the public group a tendency to frame responses to the poem in terms of a collective, distancing ‘you’ rather than an individual, personal ‘I’: an act of dissociation rather than association. This might, of course, have much to do with the dynamics of a group setting, and even the seminar-style layout of the room, and people’s reluctance to over-assert their position in a collaborative discussion. It might, too, have been connected to the collective language of the poem, which discussed people’s attitudes to war in terms of ‘we’; might a lyric love poem have encouraged a more individual response? It was, however, also a valuable reminder that an emotional or affective response to poetry might require as much training and confidence as a cognitive one; and that enabling people to articulate the values that they derive from an encounter with poetry, or with culture more widely, without imposing a language upon them with which to do so, is a significant challenge for researchers, teachers and practitioners who work with culture.

Poetry and autobiographical memory

At the final meeting of the project team, the questionnaire was under ethical review at Oxford Brookes University; at the time of this report, however, it has just been cleared for use, and the results will be written up in the project’s publications. Initial findings from the first experiment revealed the significance of poetry in people’s
autobiographical memory, and it is possible that poetry might have different affordances to novels in terms of memory and self-identity, even though they both hail from the same vividly remembered period of people's lives.

What is distinctive about the effects of reading poetry?

The test for the distinctiveness of poetry was also under review at Brunel at the end of the project period, but it will also be carried out in mid June and written up in our project publications. It is highly likely from initial pre-pilot discussions that poetry does result in an increased kind of subjunctification, which suggests that a value of engaging with poetry is the ability to take on board other perspectives, deal with uncertainty and even think in more nuanced ways.

Overall impressions of ‘the uses of poetry’

Our research in the existing literature on poetry, and our experimental use of new, combined research methods, suggest that poetry has different affordances to other kinds of writing; and that engaging with poetry thus has a distinctive potential value. Our chief observations from our initial, six-month exploration are:

--That developing the second two experiments – on the role of poetry in autobiographical memory, and on the different effects of poetry as opposed to other kinds of text – has helped us to get closer to understanding what it is that is distinctive about poetry as a cultural form, and thus what particular values could be derived from an encounter.

--That our work towards developing our questionnaire about people’s memories of poetry suggests that poetry has value in terms of developing and sustaining people’s self-identity: remembered poetry informs the stories people tell of themselves, and is one of the ways in which people can develop and understand their sense of self in terms of seeing the differences and connections between their past and present selves. Crucially, we think it has a different kind of value from other ‘meaningful’ texts remembered from earlier life, from novels to songs.

--That that difference stems from poetry’s potential to help people who encounter it to inhabit other points of view; to grapple more effectively with indeterminacy; and to hold in mind multiple possibilities. Where many cultural forms, from prose fiction to song, expose people to different perspectives, poetry, through its complex or patterned form and structure, immerses people in a cultural experience that is at once intellectual and emotional, or cognitive and affective.

--That the first two experiments, on embodiment and performance, and on cognitive and affective approaches to poetry respectively, tell us much about how we might enhance the value of people’s encounters with poetry by paying attention the way those encounters are delivered.
--That the experiment on embodiment and performance points to the importance of a mode of teaching poetry that acknowledges and incorporates the **physical dimensions of learning**, and draws on the insights of theories of ‘embodied cognition’. In the study of poetry, such embodiment enables learners not only to engage meaningfully with the voices of others, but also to put them in their own voice, or re-embody them. It suggests that learning poetry should not necessarily be an end in itself (as in the rote learning of ‘great’ literature), but could rather be a **pre-condition to a deeper engagement with poetry**, as memorisation is in acting.

--That the experiment on cognitive and affective responses to poetry points to the importance of teaching poetry in such a way that, by **engaging students’ emotions**, **deepens and nuances their intellectual engagement**, and opens up the complexity of a poem.

--That **enhancements in the teaching or delivery of poetry**, drawing on the findings of these two experiments, **could lead to an increase in the potential value of an encounter with poetry** as described in the other two experiments, in terms of enhancing people’s ability to engage with its indeterminacy, and giving people a resource to build into their identity.

--That all four experiments offered ways of gauging the value of the individual experience of poetry, and tested practical methods for engaging with that experience. Our experiments included recall tests, interviews, transcription and discourse analysis, questionnaires, measures of affective orientation, and centrality of emotion scales. We found that, in each experiment, it was the **combination of disciplinary methods employed** that made these modes of testing more revealing and, with further testing, more reliable.

--That the chief finding of the experiments and discussions was that poetry, as a cultural form, has a **special capacity to connect parts of human experience that have hitherto been separated in its use in lifelong learning: intellect and emotion (cognition and affect); mind and body; immediate experience and long-term memory and identity**. The value of poetry lies precisely in this combination; and that value can be enhanced by exploring ways of teaching and delivering poetry that engage people across all of these dimensions (e.g. reading aloud; learning by heart; embodied cognition; through emotional response as well as intellectual analysis)

--That our findings about poetry offer us valuable ways of articulating the value of the humanities in society. Engaging with poetry can ideally unite the cognitive and affective modes. This is a beneficial combination in all parts of life, because we make decisions based on emotions, and that studies show that if we lose the part of the brain that deals with emotions, we will make worse decisions. Rationality is dominant not only in universities but in wider policy and business. Poetry gives us the scope to show that **engaging fully with the humanities can in fact enhance our rational thinking,** and help us to make better decisions in our own lives, and on behalf of others.

**Developing the project in future**
To build on the initial insights gained by these experiments, it would be beneficial to explore further:

--How could the **outcome measures** of the experiments be developed further, to test e.g. deeper understanding, greater enjoyment, better, or longer-term, retention?

--What would be the benefits of **incorporating cognitive analysis of a poem into a typically affective-oriented group?** Would therapeutic reading groups, or poetry workshops, deepen their engagement if they were encouraged to trace the causes of their emotional responses in the language, patterning, or style of the poem? How would the experiment differ if conducted with a group with no experience of discussing poetry, e.g. a group of psychology students? If the poem were heard rather than read?

--What could we learn by **combining the experiments?** For example, how does movement enhance not only one’s memory of, but one’s cognitive and affective engagement with a poem? Could the embodied cognition activity deepen the level of engagement in a subsequent discussion of the poem?

--Would the experiments have different results if those conducted **individually were tested in a group setting**, and vice versa? Could we isolate the beneficial effects of the group on people’s encounters with poetry?

--How could the experiments best be adapted to work with **school-age children**?

--The experiments were valuably focused on the individual experience, drew on a productive combination of research methods, and synthesised different perceptions of the value of poetry. The challenge for future research would be to **scale** up the often one-on-one, dialogic or small-group experiments; yet scale was not the primary aim of a project that sought to test perceptions and explore new combinations of methodologies.

### The interdisciplinary research process: reflections and good practice

This penultimate part of the report captures the project team’s sense of what we as researchers and practitioners have gained – and what techniques we think could beneficially be shared – from our practice of inter-disciplinary conversation.

--First, it was important that the project’s detailed research questions and experiments were not fully determined before the project began, but **emerged instead out of the conversation between the researchers**. This gave all participants a sense of agency, allowed connections to emerge between disciplines, and, as one participant observed, gave ‘different disciplines the chance to do what they do best’.

--Second, it was important that we encouraged all participants to **reflect critically on their own approaches**, in the light of other perspectives. Our speed-dating exercise and whole-group discussions facilitated this from the outset, and generated new ideas in the process; it was supported by conversations with researchers in other, related projects. Our non-HEI team member observed that it had been a ‘healthy and refreshing experience to engage with practitioners from other disciplines’ in order to
avoid staying ‘fixed in tried and tested approaches’; and all members have reflected on changes to their future practice.

--Third, it was important that the inter-disciplinary work of the project was founded in **focussed and sustained conversation between collaborative pairs** (who researched and devised research methods that were refined by the whole group), rather than in a generalised sense that being in the same room made us inherently inter-disciplinary.

--Finally, it was clear that the team finished the project with a strong sense that, having established this collaborative framework, our project was just the **beginning of an ongoing conversation between the members of the group and our wider communities**, as our plans for future development (below) attest.

**Outputs and future directions**

We have met and exceeded the promised outputs of the project, and identified a number of ways to maximise its value to others, through further research and public engagement.

1) This **project report** details our initial findings about the values of poetry. It proposes best practice recommendations for working across disciplines, and combining research methodologies, to evaluate effectively individuals’ experiences of engaging with poetry.

2) We have proposed a **special issue of College Education** in order to synthesise our collective research findings, draw on the insights of colleagues working in related areas, and maximise access to our work (with greater reach than an edited book collection).

3) Our **full literature review is publicly available on our project blog**, along with links to other related poetry projects and news: [http://usesofpoetry.wordpress.com](http://usesofpoetry.wordpress.com). It thus serves as a free resource for the further investigation of the value of poetry.

4) Our **World War One poetry day** in Stratford-upon-Avon on 1 April gave over 40 members of the public the opportunity to engage with the research process by participating in our poetry seminars and experiments, and to enjoy talks, poetry readings and refreshments in a stimulating and thought-provoking environment.

5) Our research fellow, Karen Simecek, has benefited from six months of **professional and academic training**, both formal and informal. We have supported her development through university training courses, conference attendance and networking and leadership opportunities. The Department of English nominated Karen for a Leverhulme early career fellowship in order to develop her exciting work in this field.

6) Our research fellow established a highly successful fortnightly **poetry reading group** for postgraduate students and staff in English. This will now take a permanent place in the postgraduate calendar, with a view to our expanding it to undergraduates, and to students and staff from other subjects, in future.

7) The implications of our project for the study and practice of drama will be explored further at ‘**The Uses of Poetry in Actor Training**’, a Morag Morris funded event led by
Bessell at the Guildford School of Acting, 6 June 2014. The event will explore the value of poetry in developing actors’ work with voice, movement and audience interaction, and members of the project team will discuss the project in a final panel. Bessell envisages that this will lead to a piece of dramatic practice as research, with a specially designed dramatic piece arising from the uses of poetry investigations.

8) We propose to present our research at the **NATE conference** in Nottingham in 2015.

9) We have promoted the project through our own university marketing channels, and will publish press releases about the project when we take part in a number of **public engagement events** in the autumn of 2014 and beyond, including:

- The Saving Humans festival, November 2014
- Think Corner, city of Birmingham, March 2015
- Hay Festival, May 2015 (through the University of Birmingham’s annual provision of academic talks)

10) We have developed an application for an international **British Council workshop** with colleagues in Turkey to explore the international dimension of the cultural value of poetry.
Appendix: Research Methodology

The methodology of each of the four experiments developed during the course of the project is summarised here for reference.

**Embodiment and Performance**

-- This experiment combined techniques from drama and psychology to investigate the effects of movement on people’s ability to remember a memorised poem (‘embodied cognition’).

-- Individual participants were given a limited period (e.g. three minutes) in which to memorise a short poem using one of a range of techniques, from copying by hand, or reading silently while imagining an accompanying movement to each word, to acting out the poem.

-- The poem chosen for the experiment was ‘War’, by G. A. Studdert Kennedy, and was 8 lines in length.

-- Participants worked one-on-one with an interviewer who measured their recall against a printed copy of the poem, noted any patterns in what they remembered, and recorded their impressions of the exercise.

-- By repeating the exercise, it is possible to identify numerically which of these techniques is most successful, and test the hypothesis that movement supports learning and memory.

**Applied poetry: cognition and affect**

-- This experiment attempted to link in a seminar-style discussion the cognitive-oriented analysis of poetry typical of mainstream education with a more emotive approach advocated in poetry therapy, to see if this combination deepened participants’ intellectual and emotional engagement with a particular poem.

-- Before and after the seminar, participants were asked to complete word-association psychological questionnaires in order to gauge their mood and affective or cognitive disposition.

-- The seminar combined questions typical of the university level teaching of close reading with questions used in therapeutic settings to draw out emotional responses. The questions were refined after the pilot session, and their sequence could be varied by the seminar leader to respond to the emerging discussion.

-- The poem chosen for the experiment was ‘The Dancers’, by Edith Sitwell (1916).

-- The discussion was audio-recorded and transcribed. Researchers analysed the language, and their own experiences of observing the discussion, to identify turning points in the nature and level of participants’ engagement with the poem.

**Poetry and autobiographical memory**

-- In the largest-scale of our experiments, an online questionnaire, designed by a psychology researcher and refined and distributed by the whole team, asked participants
to recall one or poems that were significant to them, say what in particular they remembered and valued about it, rate its significance in their lives using a ‘centrality of events’ scale, and note at what time in their lives they had first encountered it.

--Respondents were asked the same questions of one or more remembered novels, in order to compare their responses to different literary forms, and to assess whether poetry had the potential for special significance in people’s autobiographical memories. The questionnaire will shortly be available online.

What is distinctive about the effects of reading poetry?

--This experiment tested what was distinctive about poetry in the ways that participants responded to it. It tested the hypothesis that reading or hearing poetry, as opposed to other kinds of text including prose fiction, led to an increased orientation towards ‘subjunctification’ in participants’ language.

--In a one-on-one interview with the participant, the researcher read aloud from three different kinds of texts, factual to poetic, and invited the participant’s responses.

--The ensuing discussion was audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed by the researcher.
References and external links

Our literature review can be found at http://usesofpoetry.wordpress.com/bibliography/. Below are full details of the references included in this report.


The Cultural Value Project seeks to make a major contribution to how we think about the value of arts and culture to individuals and to society. The project will establish a framework that will advance the way in which we talk about the value of cultural engagement and the methods by which we evaluate it. The framework will, on the one hand, be an examination of the cultural experience itself, its impact on individuals and its benefit to society; and on the other, articulate a set of evaluative approaches and methodologies appropriate to the different ways in which cultural value is manifested. This means that qualitative methodologies and case studies will sit alongside qualitative approaches.