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Article

Visual Imagination, Reflexivity and the Power of Poetry: Inquiring into Work-life Balance

Visual Imagination, Reflexivity and the Power of Poetry

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This article explores the use of visual imagination and reflexivity in the creation of poetry as a form of action inquiry. The power of poetry to help inquire into and illuminate new understandings is demonstrated in the creative and imaginative use of imagery, similes and metaphors contained within the choice of words and the connections made to them. Through my work with managers and staff in organisations, using poetry I have come to understand that the poetic words used not only hold the possibility of explaining and describing experiences, they validate the range of associated emotions and can also influence actions when new meanings and understandings are reached. I have found that the process of action inquiry encourages and facilitates reflexivity. For the purpose of this article I have chosen to focus on work–life balance Work-life Balance— an issue that many find challenging at different stages in their working lives

Keywords

poetic action inquiry, work–life balance, poetry

Introduction

Poetry is often thought to be something that is inaccessible, not particularly part of everyday life experience. However, interest in arts-based approaches, including the use of poetry in organisational research has been growing (see for example: Darmer & Grisoni, 2011; Morgan, Lange, & Buswick, 2010; Grisoni, 2008, 2009). In this article I suggest that exploring organisational and personal challenges associated with work–life balance through the medium of poetic inquiry, can generate new insights, understandings and actions. The imagery in poetic inquiry is wide ranging and can offer playful exploration of difficult or

frustrating challenges. Poetic language is full of imagery, metaphor and simile and it is through reflexive engagement with the words used that we are able to generate new actions and understandings. As I argue elsewhere poetry: 'is a powerful medium, as it can capture the richness of language and harness reflective processes that encourage expression of the complexity of organizational experience' (Grisoni, 2008, p. 111). Using poetry can bring to life and problematise an issue giving rise to fresh ways of thinking which includes an understanding and recognition that meaning is provisional, changes over time, ambiguous and uncertain. In working with poetry we are encouraged to make associative connections, question givens and seek less obvious connections which help make sense of our experiences.

In earlier work (Grisoni & Kirk, 2006) I have found that poetry helps bring together unconscious and deliberative ways of knowing, providing an opportunity to influence organisational behaviour and management practice. I identify that the power of the poem lies in its ability to focus in not only on factual details but also on behavioural and affective elements and cite Whyte (1994) who talks of 'the fierce unremitting wish for the dangerous truth that is poetry's special gift' (1994, p. xv). I argue that poems can reveal hidden aspects of organisational life:

The ability of poetry to get to the essence of an event or episode opens up an opportunity for greater understanding as well as the potential for change in individuals and organisations. (Grisoni & Kirk, 2006, p. 513).

This opportunity for greater understanding and change is a feature of reflexive practice which has been identified as an important factor in support of ethical and competent professional practice. The understanding of reflexivity that is used in this article is that it moves beyond reflection to include the influence of underlying values, assumptions and beliefs and to critically consider their impact on perceptions of experience and subsequent actions. There is a danger that it can become reduced in its meaning, power and potential to a technique especially when developed as a guideline for practice. Using action inquiry to help unscramble meaning in the poems ensures that the processes of reflexivity are activated with the potential to influence professional practice.

This paper will focus upon the creation of collaboratively generated poems, using action inquiry as an enabler of reflexive practice, exploring how this process promotes personal and professional development. In this paper I will demonstrate how writing poetry stimulates visual inquiry by working with metaphor and imagery leading to new understandings and insight. The personal and organisational dilemma that will be examined in some detail relates to experiences of Work-life-Balance - an

issue that many struggle with and feel challenged by.

Why action inquiry?

According to Torbert (2004) action inquiry as a lifelong process of transformational learning that individuals, teams and whole organisations can undertake if they wish to become increasingly capable of listening into the present moment from which the future emerges, increasingly alert to the dangers and opportunities of the present moment; and increasingly capable of performing in effective, transformational and sustainable ways. Action inquiry works at different levels as a research process: at an individual level the emphasis is on effectiveness and integrity, at an interpersonal level critical and constructive mutuality is an important aim and at organisational and societal level sustainability is the goal. Taken together these three levels create the opportunity for transformation which requires a willingness to be vulnerable and to transform oneself. At the heart of action inquiry is a recurring action-reflection cycle predicated on the relationship of improved knowledge through action, and new or revised action based on imaginative reflective learning (Ellis and Kiely, 2010). The process of inquiry is responsive to the needs of participants and can change shape and direction as understanding about what is really happening and what is really important changes and grows. The emergent inquiry process is undertaken in the spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry.

Action inquiry also facilitates the questioning of how our own assumptions are constructed and allows us to learn about and challenge our thinking. This questioning of assumptions embodied in theory and practice is integral to all action inquiry strategies. According to Ellis and Kiely (2010, p. 89) the overall purpose of action research is to create the appropriate conditions to solve work-based situations and problems within the context of a cyclical inquiry process. In addition action research also aims to making change and learning a self-generating and self-maintaining process. In participatory action research a collaborative relationship between the researcher and subjects is a central focus. Participatory action research seeks to bring about change in the lives of people that they themselves initiate.

Working with poetic action inquiry

Over the years I have run a range of poetry inspired workshops: sometimes where participants are invited to attend as part of staff development activities within a single organisation; some are stand alone activities open to a specific audience (e.g. women's networks); and some are where I work with academic co-researchers to join me in exploring the creation of poetry and inquiry into meaning (e.g. ESRC festival of

social science 2016, academic conferences such as the Art of Management and Organisation conferences). When I started working with poetry as a form of inquiry, over 15 years ago I found very few people had positive memories of or connections to poetry. Many spoke of having to memorise poems at school and that had turned them off. Others said they couldn't connect to poetry as the meanings were too hidden for them. I now find that many of those drawn to attend the workshops and events I organise have written their own poetry and are much more open to experiment with this form of inquiry. To explore the issues and access the lived experience of participants in the workshop I select from the wide range of poetic forms such as free writing, haiku, black out poetry, blank verse, sonnets etc. depending on the experience of the group and my sense of the general enthusiasm for poetry among participants.

As I have refined and developed my practice, the process I have developed for the creation of poems takes the form of action inquiry with emphasis not only on creating poems but also on inquiring into the meaning of the poems. The focus of the inquiry is agreed with participants attending the workshops who are invited to discuss their experiences and what the topic means to them. At this point I have found that it is useful to include some embodiment exercises to experience the impact of the concept in a holistic way. This helps workshop participants move from intellectualising the topic to the personal experience of what it feels like and builds trust and openness in the group. Asking questions such as: Can you make a shape to represent work-life balance? What does work-life balance feel like to you? Where do you feel tension, heaviness in your body? What happens when you move? This process helps open participants to a different range of experiential knowing which helps activate creative imagination. Next, I introduce the idea that there is a need to find new ways to address flexible responses, innovation and knowledge creation in times of unpredictability and instability which has provoked calls to take inspiration from the arts (Knowles & Cole, 2008). We talk a little about poetry and experiences of writing and reading poetry. Depending on how long the event is participants are asked to bring along and read a favourite poem or something they have written themselves to share. These introductory activities help set the context and mood for the workshop: asking that participants will work with their experiences and emotions, access their imagination and will appreciate how others see and feel differently.

For those with very little experience haiku provides a useful form as there are clear guides for the number of syllables and lines that structure the poem (Grisoni, 2009). The 'corps exquis' form is another poetic form particularly suited to collaborative writing and shared exploration of an

organisational issue or problem (see Grisoni, 2008, p. 118). The aim is to facilitate multiple voices, readings and understandings of what is produced and be surprised by unanticipated connections (Grisoni, 2009, 2012; Page, Grisoni, & Turner, 2014). Working with groups of up to 8 participants, I tend to provide a loose structure for each line such as: first line – consider what the issue is like (encouraging imagery, simile or metaphor); next line – free associate to the key word given; next line – how does it feel (encouraging emotion); next line – ask a question; next lines – free associate (promotes more imagery), last line – offer an alternative or action (promotes reflexivity). After each person has written their line they fold the paper over and write a key word as a prompt for the next person to generate their line of poetry. This writing of one line, folding and choosing a key word continues until everyone has written 8 lines (depending on the number in the group). At this point the paper has found its way back to each person who wrote the first line and the poem can be revealed (it sounds complicated but isn't in practice!). Here is an example of abstracts from collective poems created at the 2007 poetry and poetics stream of the Art of Management Conference with the focus on working with poetry as arts-based method of research:

Collective poem: where each line is written by a different person	Key word prompts
In the room the people come and go	Room
Room for laughter	Laughter
It's fun and games alright	Alright
Together we create, re-create	Re-create
something new and something old	
Make again, engender, conceive, co-create	Co-create
Co-create, re-create, calculate	Calculate
Being here, hot, hopeful	Here
Here and now, now and here, nowhere	Now
Now and again I feel here and now	Feel
Summertime becomes a silent surprise	Silent

Still, quiet, withdrawn

Withdrawn

Inside my heart – more precious thoughts

Heart

There's no bypass for this

This

Out of the box, out of the role, beyond the rules

Role

The joy of this method is that not only are collective poems created reflecting a collective perspective, but participants can reconstruct their own lines and discover the poem they did not know they had written. Here is my poem extracted from the collective poems (two lines of which are contained in the examples above):

Being here, hot, hopeful

Desire to be alive, make a difference

Connections and memories, forgotten and remembered

Confusing opposites and more

Together we create, re-create something new and something old

Who has the answers we seek?

Presented without further explanation the poems appear intriguing but perhaps of limited value and use. It is only on further reflexive inquiry into what meanings the poems hold for individuals and groups that a fuller appreciation is developed. The richness of images and associations contained in the poems when combined with reflexive sense-making encourages new insights and offers the potential for individual and organisational change.

One area of concern that sometimes emerges from participants in engaging with arts-based approaches such as poetry relates to concerns about the quality (and by implication relevance) of the work produced. Lafreniere and Cox (2012) in their work to develop a framework for the assessment of arts-based works suggest that 'An example of a relevant quality of a research poem ... would be the vividness with which the poem conjures an image, sound or feeling' (2012, p. 321). Throughout this paper the poems have provided vivid imagery directly based as they are in the experiences of participants and in addition they have provided plenty of opportunity to generate new questions and inspiration for dialogue (Siegesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008). In terms of incorporating reflexivity into the inquiry process it therefore becomes important for participants to work with each other where the assumptions of deficiency and negativity have taken hold presenting

work–life balance as an impossible task for those facing a range of life challenges and choices. To access this level of insight and self discovery requires a level of trust. This is established during the workshop where time is given to review the poems. Participants develop skills of inquiry into the poems assisting others and themselves in their processes of reflection and developing reflexivity moving the activity of generating poems beyond word play into serious consideration of applications of new insights into life contexts. Working reflexively with action inquiry requires questioning and capturing ‘the complex, interactional and emergent nature of our social experience’ (Cunliffe, 2003, p. 984). In this way we can work with differing interpretations of and meanings ascribed to understandings of work–life balance which is the focus of this paper.

The challenges of work–life balance

The question of work–life balance is topical and closely associated with the area of ‘well-being’ in the workplace as organisational life increasingly features high levels of stress and illness. It can be broadly defined as a set of work-based policies and practice to help individuals to achieve a balance between the demands arising from paid work and their personal lives. When it was introduced by Government in the UK during the 1970’s the term related principally to employers and the work context with the introduction of flexible working practices for workers with caring responsibilities (Hantrais, 2000). It remains, however, essentially a gender-blind concept applying equally to men and women, although there is a link to the gender equality agenda as work–life balance practices can serve the dual purpose of supporting women’s participation in the labour market and at the same time facilitating a redistribution of caring responsibilities (largely unpaid) between men and women. Work–life balance policies and practices have become an integral part of EU employment policies and the Lisbon strategy for growth and employment expressly refers to the need for enabling ‘people to stay in employment ... by creating structures in which they can best combine their work and non work responsibilities’ (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living & Working Conditions, 2007, p. 3). Since then the concept has taken a particular turn, linking closely to stress experienced by those in paid employment, their ability to cope with the pressures of work and demands on their time and resources. In 2000 the UK’s labour government launched a major work–life balance campaign that focussed on the business case to highlight a number of benefits that employers could gain from the adoption of work–life balance practices: improved staff retention and recruitment, reduction of absenteeism, increased staff productivity and performance (Department of Trade & Industry, 2001). There is some more recent evidence that

measures taken to address the current economic crisis have widened inequalities, and that vulnerable demographic groups and organisations are bearing the brunt of national and international austerity measures (Leschke & Jepsen, 2012; Pearson & Sweetman, 2011).

The idea of work–life balance has relevance to those of us in the Western world who need to work to earn money to pay bills and who also want some kind of quality of life outside work. It is arguably not an issue for those for whom survival is the main focus of their lives, where enjoying leisure time is an unknown concept, or for whom work dominates to the exclusion of everything else such as refugees, subsistence farmers and indentured labourers. We also recognise that our disposition towards work–life balance changes over time as we age. The interest in work–life balance is in part driven by concerns that unbalanced work–family relationships can result in reduced health and performance outcomes for individuals, families and organisations. The term has developed over years with a move to encompass a broader scope: work–life balance includes employees who are not parents or carers, but who desire balance for non-work activities such as sports, study and travel. Work–life balance is one of the areas where the effect of austerity is most acutely felt. As a consequence many feel their balance out of kilter and it is important to register that men and women articulate their experience and struggle in different/gendered ways.

In their work, Kaliath and Brough (2008) have attempted to develop an agreed definition for the term to help ensure consistency in measurement and assist human resource management interventions in organisations. They argue that: ‘...without a direct measure of work–family balance, it is difficult to investigate the impact of ‘family-friendly’ policies on key individual and organisational outcome variables’ (2008, p. 323). They review six conceptualisations of work–life balance found in the literature: multiple roles; equity across multiple roles; satisfaction between multiple roles; fulfilment of role salience between multiple roles; a relationship between conflict and facilitation; and perceived control between multiple roles. Based on their review they identify the two primary features of work–life balance and propose a new definition. The first thread of meaning they identify relates to ‘perceptions of good balance’ rather than ‘conflict’ or ‘facilitation’. The second is the recognition that levels of change over time according to circumstances and specific life events. The definition they offer is:

Work–life balance is the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual’s current life priorities (2008, p. 326).

According to Kaliath and Brough (2008), any assessment of work–life

balance needs to include individual preferences in relation to current role, for example: whether an individual actually prefers to spend more or less time in work and non-work activities. Adopting the value base that it is in an individual's best interest to live a balanced life; they believe that effective balance leads to positive growth and development within both the work and/or non-work domains. Individual work/life priorities can voluntarily change to enable development in non-work activities: private study, new baby, extended travel and/or growth at work: such as working harder to gain formal work recognition and promotion.

Illustrating challenges of work–life balance through poetry

In 2015 in my capacity as a change management academic I was invited by the chief executive officer of a public sector organisation which had undergone a whole organisation restructuring to assist in helping staff come to terms with the change management process. All roles at middle management level and above had been redesigned and role holders were placed on redundancy notice, but also invited to apply for new roles. Some were successful, others left the organisation and others remained in new, but lower status roles. There was a large amount of upset and unhappiness throughout the organisation as a result of the changes and many were finding it difficult to adjust to the new order of things. One to one interviews were held with fifty new role holders, eight focus groups of up to 8 people were held for those who preferred to discuss the issues with others and a series of 6 voluntary workshops offered to anyone wishing to explore the personal impact of the changes further. The focus of the workshops varied according to the group and numbers attending varied from 12–24 participants. For two workshops the focus was on work–life balance, other workshops focused on surviving change and managing change differently. The idea of using arts-based approaches and specifically poetry was introduced with workshop briefing materials. Working with pictures and creating collages of experiences of change had been used as part of the individual interviews and participants were therefore aware of the benefits of taking a different and more experiential approach to working on emotive issues. The workshops lasted a day with four sessions: agreeing and relating to the workshop topic; creating poems; inquiring into the poems; reviewing learning and identifying actions. Exact timings and content varied according to the needs of the group. Poetry workshops were offered on a voluntary basis to anyone who wanted to explore and share their experiences further. They were offered as a way of helping to make sense of what was going on, to articulate the emotional experiences they has been through and to help come to terms with what had happened.

Selected abstracts follow of poems written during workshops that

explore the experiences of work–life balance that were challenging workshop participants. The poems are reproduced with permission from participants; names and the organisation have been anonymised to protect confidentiality. Review discussions encouraged each participant to explore the imagery in their poem, the connections they made to it and the emotions that arose. Participants were also encouraged to explore how associations made to the poems might relate to their lives and what might need to change or improve for them if that seemed appropriate.

The following example is selected from one of the groups where experience of organisational change had left many feeling unhappy, disempowered and angry as is demonstrated in the emotive words and images used: ‘big bad centre’, ‘beast’, ‘turmoil’, ‘like a sparrow at an insect’ ‘afraid’, ‘booted out’. In examining the imagery behind the words used, the group review setting enabled questioning about what could be done to change perceptions, behaviours and attitudes. In one workshop the group chose to focus on the word rhythm which occurred in a couple of places as a way of thinking about work–life balance: how the pace changes, flows and sets in well know tunes. There is a comfort in rhythm and the association made to life cycle, it can also be jarring if the music is not to your particular taste. In thinking about the organisational changes that participants had experienced a question about whether the changes were to individual taste or not was raised. This prompted a discussion about those who had done well out of the restructuring and those who felt they had lost out. The next area that caught the attention of the group was the mention of food and feasts, when the anticipation of a good meal is disappointed or greed takes over and you overindulge. This spoke to ambitious personal hopes that some had for the restructuring that were disappointed – the focus for resulting anger being placed on the ‘big bad centre’ and the ‘beast’. Thoughts about the concept of work–life balance seemed to keep it as a largely unachievable thing in the realm of aspiration, torture, challenge, ideal and choice.

Collective poem: where each line is written by a different person	Key word prompt for next line
Work–life balance: a life time challenge	Challenge
The challenge is in the rhythm of life	Rhythm
Its rhythm depends on those around us	Depends
Whose balance depends on who?	Who

Who's afraid of the big bad centre	Afraid
Should I be afraid anymore?	
Work-life balance: a tortuous problem	Torture
A killer if you want to achieve everything	Killer
Choosing life is a killer – it might cost you work life to gain a life	
The cost of how you wish to live your life	Cost
Can we live with the demands that conflict within us?	Live
Conflict, conflag, congestion, indigestion	Conflict
Work-life balance: means time for lunch	Lunch
A moveable feast: an unsatisfactory meal	Feast
A feast if you get it, but a beast when you don't	Beast
If the beast is in the way then you have to change	Change
And rhythmically respond to change	Rhythmically
Rhythmically I complete my task and sleep	
Work-life balance: eluding my grasp	Grasp
Hold on to a sense of reality	Sense
'Nonsense' they told us	They
A group effort	Effort
If it's too much then it's too much – get a life	Life

But above all, life is for you to get

Work–life balance: an ideal to aspire to Ideal

The ideal slips away as the turmoil rages Turmoil

The turmoil of the 25 h day Day

Never a fulfilled day: never enough Never

Never, never a question I ask myself whenever I
don't achieve it

Wherever, whenever, live life to the full Whenever

Work–life balance: is a life choice Choice

It's a question of choice for us all Question

Like a sparrow at an insect Like

But how does the balance feel when you clutch
it? Clutch

Taking the foot off the clutch is never easy Foot

You often get booted out, if you have spent too
long in the office

Following on from the group poems an option for those interested and where there is time within the confines of the workshop is to unscramble the collective poem to discover the individual poem. In some ways it could be argued that the poems do not have the same flow or connectivity as the collective poems illustrated above as the key word prompt does not apply to help lead into the next line. Nevertheless the images created by the individual will hold significance for the author. These are the poems the individual did not know they had written.

For example, Keith's poem included the lines ' 'Nonsense' they told us' , 'Taking the foot off the clutch is never easy' and 'Should I be afraid anymore?'. He was intrigued at how angry he was about being told 'nonsense' – it made him feel like a child being told off. The 'they' was

senior management, who in his view were acting like critical parents and not listening to the experience of people in the organisation. He was also surprised by the way in his words, 'his best was not good enough', it didn't seem to matter how hard he worked it would never be enough, and this left him fearful for his career. In discussing the image of the clutch and shifting up a gear, (going for promotion) he came to think that his fear was more about fear of failure than putting in more work effort.

Allan found his poem difficult to unravel. He acknowledged that work wasn't everything for him and he was more interested in life outside work – 'A feast if you get it'. Being 'booted out' spoke to him of it being time to give up work and retire, rather than being told to go home because he had 'spent too long in the office'. This shows that the review sessions helped make sense of the meanings individuals ascribed to their poems, rather than someone else's interpretation which is important and helping shift understanding into reflexivity.

The next illustration is an example drawn from two women: Alice and Mary who worked together to create poems and then inquire into their meanings, and for whom the experience of work–life balance is at a critical point. The poems were written individually using key word prompts. The key word prompts are selected by the person writing the line of poetry, for example Mary writes ' Work life balance a never ending treadmill' and selects 'never ending' as the prompt for the next line.

Mary's poem	Key word prompt for next line
Work–life balance a never ending treadmill	Never ending
Never ending demands, decisions, things to do	Demands
I try so hard to respond and feel hopeless	Hopeless
I wish for positivity that hopeless can be turned into hope	Wish
No longer at your command, I am free	Free
To be free, I need to rest	

Mary is balancing her work with being primary carer for her husband who is severely mentally impaired following a stroke four years ago. Her physical and emotional exhaustion is reflected in her choice of 'treadmill' as the image for her work–life balance. In the one to one review session

with Alice following the poetry writing she expressed how she felt trapped and unable to escape the drudgery of the demands on her. In her desire to be free, she recognises she needs a break and some rest. As someone who likes to look for the positives in life, Mary was surprised at how dark her poem was and how clearly it pointed to the need for her to have a break. In the review session she talked about how she might be able to get someone else to look after her husband while she had a holiday with friends using the Carer's support network that is available locally.

In the next poem Alice envisages herself as balancing scales, she discovers from her poem that the focus of work–life balance issues for her is work based, that she needs to find ways to delegate more and not take on so much of the emotional 'burden' from others that weighs her down. She was intrigued at the imagery of traipsing along muddy furrows – like a ploughing shire horse. She admired the strength of the horse, its loyalty and obedience, but could feel the weight of the mud sticking on her shoes and legs, making it hard to walk. She is also exhausted, but in a different way to Mary and she resolves to find more time for herself, and change her work practice.

Alice's poem	Key word prompt for next line
I am the scales, my arms are heavy...	Heavy
Heavy buckets of muck and filth, as I traipse along muddy furrows	Muck
Dirty, dirty, mess – exhausting clearing up behind others	
Others' anger and worry burden me and weigh me down	Others
Fair weights for all, share the load and the balance restores	Weigh
Find time to restore myself	Restores

These illustrations demonstrate how reflexive learning can be derived from collaborative writing. In the next section I will discuss how poetry and imagination combine into reflexivity through collaborative inquiry.

When working poetically with a topic such as work–life balance, rather than fix to a single definition it is important to allow random associations and meaning to emerge as this encourages a questioning of established

definitions and give form to new understandings from an experiential base. Work–life balance as the topic for this inquiry contains within it a powerful and loaded metaphor. In addition, Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw (2003) notice that sometimes the word ‘balance’ is used as a noun (when, for example, one is encouraged to achieve balance), and other times as a verb (to balance work and family demands) or an adjective (as in a balanced life) and that work–life balance often implies cutting back on work to spend more time with the family. It is questioning the focus on balance as positive, individual rather than shared balance, whether life changes are voluntary, (such as in unemployment or redundancy), or unforeseen, (such as illness and caring responsibilities for a partner or elderly parents), and that these can fall differently on men and women that becomes important in poetic inquiry.

Examining metaphor and visual imagination in work–life balance poetry

Visual imagination is stimulated in poetic writing not only through the use of metaphors and similes, but in the structure rhythm, rhyme pace and tone of the poem. The poems created through the ‘corps exquis’ method is given a flow in the use of connecting prompt words, which help to provide structure for collaborative writing processes. In the discussion that follows I will concentrate on the visual imagery used and connections made to it in terms of reflexive sense making. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) make the point that metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, ‘a matter of words rather than thought or action’ they usefully add that metaphor is ‘pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action’ (2003, p. 3) and therefore is an aid to reflexivity. The concepts and words we use structure what we perceive, the choices we make and how we function and relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. The words we choose are therefore an important source of evidence for what the system we create and experience around us is like. Work–life balance has entered our understanding and has become what Lakoff and Johnson (2003) would categorise as a structural metaphor which:

allow us to do more than just orient concepts, refer to them, quantify them etc. as we do with simple orientational and ontological metaphors; they allow us in addition, to use one highly structured and clearly delineated concept to structure another. (2003, p. 61).

The poems produced therefore need to be understood in terms of both the experiential, contextual and cultural basis, with a reflexive understanding that the meanings derived are relevant at a point in time and therefore not permanent.

Kaliath and Brough's (2008) review of different conceptualisations of work–life balance focussed on the issue of roles and multiple roles, satisfaction, fulfilment and salience between different roles. When investigating the concept from a metaphorical and poetic perspective based on lived experience, the incommensurability of achieving a permanent balance becomes evident. Probably the first thought about work–life balance in terms of imagery draws attention to the situational notion of balance. The value base behind this is that to be balanced is positive; a good healthy thing to have where there is therefore no conflict of interests between different roles and the individual is in control of their life and work. On the other hand, to be unbalanced, either physically or mentally is viewed as bad, lacking. When balanced we are functioning human beings, sane, in control of our emotions, and physical self; whereas to be unbalanced has a sense of mental or physical ill health, lack of control, excess and greed and we are out of control of ourselves and our surroundings. This is where the rub lies: for to acknowledge that somehow work–life balance has not been or cannot be achieved results in a sense of deficit and a permanently deficient model for living life. Indeed the collective poems show how the ideal of work–life balance is experienced as an impossible goal.

...an ideal to aspire to

The ideal slips away as the turmoil rages

The turmoil of the 25 h day...

When thinking of balance and scales the image of fairness and justice is introduced whatever is loaded on one side, whether heavy or light, needs exactly equal measure on the other side. Its meaning is therefore also ontological in the sense that balance is a bounded concept, Whatever is balanced, whether it is time, money, physical effort, emotional investment etc. needs to be matched in a way that the individual feels is fair and just. This means that to achieve balance there needs to be stillness and stability and that must hold. We can think of Olympic gymnasts perfectly poised and balanced holding a difficult position and defying gravity, however this can only be maintained for a very short time and the training, skills development, aptitude, daring, courage and strength to hold these poses is considerable – not accessible or obtainable for most of us. This state is difficult to achieve and impossible to maintain as nothing in life is static. As dynamic sentient human beings we are always changing, physically and mentally: growing older, making choices etc. and the notion of maintaining a single state in work–life balance is therefore irrelevant. We also are unable to control and fully influence our surroundings and events that take place around us either in the work place or at home as Mary and Alice's poems aptly illustrated:

Never ending demands, decisions, things to do

I try so hard to respond and feel hopeless

and

Others' anger and worry burden me and weigh me down

What then is being balanced in work–life balance in addition to the obvious answer: work and life? Time weighed against money is one possibility as a way of tackling the dilemma of whether we work to live or live to work. Maximising one is supposed to facilitate the other. However this is another problematic duality as time is a fixed and finite resource, whereas money is not. The following excerpt from the collective poem illustrates this well:

Choosing life is a killer – it might cost you work life to gain a life

The cost of how you wish to live your life

Lakoff and Johnson (2003, p. 9) talk about the underlying metaphorical concepts to time and money and how viewing time and money as limited and valuable resource is specifically tied to our industrial society, influencing how we think about and act upon experiences of the balance between the two concepts. In addition labour and time are described as material resources serving purposeful ends; they can be quantified and given value, used up progressively as the purpose is served (2003, p. 65):

A feast if you get it, but a beast when you don't

...

Never a fulfilled day: never enough

According to Lakoff and Johnson the metaphor of labour as a kind of activity assumes a clear distinction with those things that are not labour:

It makes the assumption that we can tell work from play and productive activity from non-productive activity. These assumptions obviously fail to fit reality much of the time, except perhaps on assembly lines, chain gangs etc. The view of labour as merely a kind of activity, independent of who performs it, how he experiences it and what it means in his life, hides the issues of whether the work is personally meaningful, satisfying and humane (2003, p. 67).

Perhaps that is what our participants are saying about their work–life balance in that they do not feel their work is meaningful, satisfying and humane? We can see the range of negative associations that those writing about their experiences have identified:

a treadmill

buckets of muck and filth

a killer

a moveable feast

turmoil

a tortuous problem

a sparrow pecking at an insect

These emphasise how difficult achieving a positive work–life balance is for many and I am reminded that the participants' poems represented in this article are from a group who are all in their late 50's and arguably are facing different emerging priorities at this stage in their lives – thinking about retirement and wanting to develop other interests beyond work demands and at the same time outside work caring responsibilities shift from children to partners and parents. The imagery in poetry draws focus to some and away from other possibilities, as Cunliffe (2003) points out:

...meaning is created through a constant interplay of presence/absence and what is not said is as important as what is said because each supplements the other ... actively exploring the paradoxical relationship between presence and absence ... reveals contradictions in truth claims and the instability of language by turning meaning back on itself. (2003, p. 987)

In seeking out more positive alternatives to counterbalance the negativity in the poems, I noticed the reference to 'rhythm of life' and 'rhythmically' which offers a more accepting and holistic possibility for coping with the challenges that come with trying to achieve a positive work–life balance. Daring 'to take the foot off the clutch' and presumably freewheel holds a similar sense of acceptance. The following collaborative poem illustrates the fluidity participants at another workshop felt is important when thinking about and working with a concept such as work–life balance. This group were unhappy with the images of work–life balance as scales and balance and worked together to find something that was more fluid and elemental to describe their life challenges. The ebb and flow of water seemed to offer different possibilities:

Work life balance is like fighting against a strong tide

With rocks opposite each other and crashing waves

Relentlessly eroding each into separate grains of sand

The impossibility of separate lives as work floods in

Stop! The waves encroach

Think, think – do you want this?

Conclusion

This paper has explored imagination and reflexivity by focusing upon the creation of collaboratively generated poems, together with action inquiry as an enabler of reflexive practice, exploring how this process supports personal and professional development in relation to the issue of work–life balance. I have demonstrated that there is a power in poetry to help inquire into and illuminate new understandings based on lived experiences which is demonstrated in the creative and imaginative use of imagery contained within the choice of words and the connections made to them. The focus for this work has been on the challenges to understand work–life balance from an experiential perspective and has provided a different way of thinking about and working with the concept. Despite government legislation and arguments set out for employers for the business case of work–life balance, the poems illustrate how it is experienced as a largely unattainable goal and as a consequence leaves people feeling dissatisfied and with a sense of failure, particularly at later stages in working life. I have also found that writing poetry helps an individual understand where their focus of attention has been placed and encourages reflexivity in thinking through alternative conceptualisations and actions that might produce benefits for individuals, their families and the organisations they work for. My personal reflection on the poetic inquiry process with reflexive analysis of meaning and action derived from the poems suggests that this is an area that merits further development.

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