

## **Summer Research Reflective Report: What I gave and what I gained through a summer spent researching the poetry eco-system of Leeds**

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This summer I carried out a research project investigating the poetry eco-system of Leeds. With little direct instruction as to how I should go about this project, I was given a great deal of freedom in both the scope and the presentation of my research. This was both exciting and daunting, as it meant I could make the project truly my own, but it also required a lot of research and consideration before I got stuck into the project itself.

The first decision I had to make was what about the kind of poetry I wanted to focus on. After an early meeting with the directors of the National Poetry Centre, I was enthusiastic about the idea of investigating spoken-word poetry, its distinctions and its similarities to the written word. Initially, I thought I would begin with a broader examination of this that was not just linked to Leeds but to the global history of oral poetry. However, after some early research I realised that broadening my scope even further was a mistake, and decided to remain focused on Leeds. It was only after attending several more meetings, reading the literature already created on the poetry scene in Leeds, and beginning my own research into the poetry activity of Leeds past and present that I landed on the idea of creating a map. The early difficulties in deciding how to focus and present my research, which themselves required weeks of research and a great deal of thought, taught me a lot about how much more goes into a research project than what you see in the final output, and how important it is to remain patient and accept this long process as an essential part of the project. Although it can feel like these early weeks were wasted, and it certainly did at the time, I realise now that they were in fact the most important part of the entire project, as without them I would never have found a specific focus and would have begun a project I didn't fully comprehend.

The next big hurdle I faced was the sheer quantity of content I had to research. As I had decided that my map would feature Leeds poetry both past and present, and both written and spoken, and would make distinctions not based on these elements but instead on the character and the purpose of the poetry itself, I had a huge amount of poetry publications and activity to wade through. Spread out over a couple of months, I attended every recurring poetry event in or around Leeds that I could, made contact with many of the key players in the Leeds poetry scene, interviewed some of them, visited community centres and publication houses, and began to develop a real understanding of the current poetic activity in Leeds; at the same time, I was researching the history of poetry in Leeds, reading essays and anthologies to get an

understanding of the culture that characterised the scene in the past, and using archives to research individual figures as well as organisations and initiatives, many of which were linked to the university. All of these elements, which come together to start to build a picture of the Leeds poetry eco-system, taught me about how much more poetry can access and influence than simply the page. It broadened my mind about the forms and areas in which poetry appears, as well as its various purposes. Working on a poetry map, which brings together such diverse forms of poetry, helped me to understand how vast and unpredictable the scope of both poetry itself and any project that aims to investigate it can be.

It also taught me, however, about the limitations of independent work. Although it was never my intention to create a comprehensive guide to poetry in Leeds, which is indeed impossible, I was surprised by just how much time everything took, and struggled to reconcile my initial vision for the map with the practical possibilities as just one person. This has resulted in my project spanning a period of much more than six weeks, and although I wouldn't change this at all, as I am still determined to finish it to the best of my ability, it has taught me a lot about the importance of evaluating reasonable expectations before commencing a research project, which is something I will be more careful to do in the future.

As well as increasing my awareness of all the preparations and 'unseen research' that goes into a project, and the importance of setting realistic goals, this research project has both challenged and helped me to develop my leadership skills. As the only person working on this project, the leadership skills I developed were more closely linked to taking initiative and responsibility within a project. I learnt, for example, that when you yourself are not being given clear or comprehensive instructions, it is very important to decide on your own, specific, goals, as not doing so can result in aimlessness and uncertainty. This is a lesson I will be sure to use when I am in a leadership position within a team, as I now understand the importance of setting specific targets or ambitions. I also had the opportunity to develop my ability to work with people with a wide variety of personalities and needs, as there is a great deal of diversity in the Leeds poetry scene. I developed a better understanding of how to adapt your approach to people in a way that makes them feel more comfortable and therefore enables you to carry out your research in a more effective and positive way. This is an understanding I will take with me into leadership roles in the future. Finally, as I mentioned, I developed a greater appreciation for the importance of delegation and, when I am responsible for a team project, I will be more aware of the need to ensure that individuals are not over-burdened by delegating tasks. I will also, however, will try to remain aware of the importance of everyone working together towards a shared goal, so that re-allocation of tasks does not compromise the cohesiveness of the project, which is something I didn't have to consider during this project as I was working alone.

I hope, however, that my project had and will continue to have a positive impact not just on my own life but on the community it is involved with. My aim in creating a poetry map was to increase both the visibility and the accessibility of poetry in Leeds. I believe that much of the poetic activity of Leeds past and present is underrepresented and underestimated; this is damaging to the scene partly because people simply don't know how to get involved with it, and partly because, without a reputation as widely revered as those of cities like Manchester and London, people may in fact be less inclined to try it out. This is why I was so eager to include Leeds' rich history of poetic excellence in the map, in order to create a sense of the city's evolution but also its grounding in a rich and vibrant culture that began truly to blossom midway through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I hope, therefore, that my map will increase awareness of and enthusiasm for the Leeds poetry scene and will, without trying to capture it entirely, enable people to get a greater sense of what the city has to offer, and of what it has achieved in the past.

I hope, also, that not only the final product of my research but also the process of its completion will have had a positive impact. By carrying out interviews and making connections with many key figures on the scene, I not only accessed a greater depth of knowledge to inform my map but also was able to contribute to the web of communication and collaboration that the National Poetry Centre is trying to foster. Speaking face-to-face allowed me to develop real connections with these people, and meant that I was able not only to get information out of them but also to communicate information that they would benefit from, such as the activities of other people I had spoken to, and potential opportunities for collaboration and progression that I could see. I was therefore able to play a small role in working towards a more unified community. I also took the opportunity to ask individuals directly what they would want to see from a National Poetry Centre, specifically in terms of support for existing initiatives and the development of new ones, which is information I was able to pass onto the directors of the centre. This, I hope, has helped them to incorporate a genuine and personal understanding of the local community into their policies and initiatives. In these ways, it is not only the final project but also the process itself that enabled me to work towards my goal of encouraging a more cohesive and communicative community. This fact taught me some personal lessons about how important it is to value not only the outcome but also the experience of a research project, as in the past I would have focused only on the 'material' output without caring too much about all of the other immaterial benefits.

Another, somewhat unexpected but certainly positive, consequence of my research is the opportunities it has opened for me to be involved in the activity of the National Poetry Centre in many different ways. Because of the relationship I developed with them, over the course of various meetings and communications about my research project, I was able to express my enthusiasm to be involved in the organisation in ways not directly linked to my research. I was, therefore, invited to a meeting in which the

centre was consulting designers about the presentation of their website and future publications, and was invited to give my views on their branding. I was able to provide insight specifically about what a younger audience might be interested in, and the ways in which they might like to be treated. After this, I was invited to a meeting of the National Poetry Centre working group, where I shared my research but also participated in discussions about various other activities and concerns of the centre; I have been invited to return to their next meeting. This demonstrates how invaluable my research project was in enabling me to develop a relationship with the centre, which I hope will continue to evolve and perhaps offer future opportunities. I also, as part of this relationship, have volunteered at multiple events they have run, which has both given me a greater insight into the workings of such events, and enabled me to make further connections with other organisations present at the event (such as Out Of Many People, who invited me to get involved with their own events as well). Again, this has given me the opportunity to become more involved with a sector that I may well work in in the future, and all of these opportunities are ones that materialised from my research project.

Although I do not know exactly what I want to do in the future, working at these events and participating in these meetings has given me a huge amount more confidence in my knowledge of the sector, and has already taught me a great deal about how it works. It has deepened my understanding of the wide variety of talents necessary to develop a functioning and successful literature organisation, many of which are not linked explicitly to literature itself but instead to business management and events organisation. This has been invaluable in helping me to develop greater clarity in terms of what I want to do with my own career, and indeed what I do not want to do. It has been so helpful to be exposed to the ways in which literature organisations function, as this is a world that, although I would like to enter, I had not had much previous experience in, and is certainly a world that is very different from the study of literature at university.

That said, I have realised that, although I certainly want to remain involved in the world of literature organisations and to use this opportunity to access others, I perhaps find more fulfilment from the research element of such organisations than I do from the more practical tasks of management and event planning. This is why I was so glad to have the opportunity to share my research with other scholars at the Laidlaw conference. I really enjoyed sharing my research, but also was so interested to hear about the research of other scholars, and the ways in which our projects overlap. I met, for example, a scholar researching radical bookshops, and another who had investigated the relationship between poetry and mental health. These meetings lead to very interesting discussions, and the development of connections that could lead to collaborative opportunities in the future. I benefited greatly from the Laidlaw conference, and am enthusiastic to attend more conferences in the future. After my

presentation at the National Poetry Centre working group, in fact, one of the board members mentioned the possibility of me accompanying her to a research conference about writing and environments next year, which is a possibility I will try to materialise.

In such ways, my research project has given me both insight and access into the sector I hope to work in in the future, and has already led to opportunities I would never have expected when starting. The unpredictability of these experiences, moreover, has made me realise how important it is to make the most of every opportunity I am given, and to do my best to maintain and develop relationships I have with individuals and with organisations. This project, therefore, has been both unpredictable and transformative since the very start, and I am excited to see where these opportunities lead next.