



# Guest Editor's Introduction

## A Venture into the Counter-Intuitive

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This special issue of *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines* (LLAD) on Poetry Across the Curriculum (PAC) explores a function of written language that promotes learning and communication but is often neglected in discussions of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). Although WAC programs embrace such writing-to-learn activities as freewriting, journaling, and emailing, in addition to encouraging the drafting and revising of academic and functional prose, they usually pay little attention to creative writing as a tool for learning and for educational and cultural expression. As co-director of WAC programs for more than twenty-five years, I think I understand some of the reasons. WAC program directors expect resistance when they suggest to chemists that their students might write poetry to make personal connections, to understand technical matters, or to examine relevant social and ethical issues of course subject matter. And chemistry teachers, for that matter, are wary of the response they anticipate from their students if they require a brief poem about toxic waste or the concept of equilibrium.

Poetry's outsider status may be changing in American culture, particularly since September 11, 2001. In the days, months, and now years since the attack on the World Trade Center, poetry from many cultures and eras freely circulated with increased frequency on the Internet and in newspapers and magazines, expressing and connecting to our collective thoughts, emotions, questions, and imaginings. As Mary Louise Pratt asks in her current Modern Language Association President's Newsletter Column, "Of Poets and Polyglots" (Spring 2003), who "would have imagined in 1990 that hip-hop was going to revolutionize American popular music and carry over into language and cultural interfaces all over the

planet?" (3) *Def Poetry Jam* continues successfully on Broadway, poetry slams occur in coffee houses and pubs throughout the country, and people from all walks of life write poetry for family occasions such as births, weddings, and funerals. Self-proclaimed poets often write about temporal and pointedly political topics to audiences as multi-culturally diverse as the poets themselves, dispelling the myth that only ordained bards write meaningful poetry and that the most significant topics are the great eternal themes of love, death, courage, sacrifice, and the founding of civilizations. The World Wide Web shares its virtual and international space of established websites for canonical poets William Blake <<http://www.blakearchive.org>> and Emily Dickinson <<http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/emilydickinson/>> with not so established poets at websites like [poetsagainsthewar.org](http://poetsagainsthewar.org) and [wagingpeace.org](http://wagingpeace.org). At The Academy of American Poets and other Websites, you can find poems on numerous subjects, including "grief and consolation" in the section "Post-9/11 Poetry Resources" <<http://www.poets.org/sept11.cfm>>.

In late January 2003, Sam Hamill called upon poets to write about their opposition to the war brewing against Iraq, and by March 1, 2003, 13,000 poems had been collected and published by [poetsagainsthewar.org](http://poetsagainsthewar.org). In response to political activity by poets, in early February 2003, the White House cancelled its symposium planned for February 12 on "Poetry and the American Voice," a gathering of poets, scholars, and critics to celebrate the work of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Langston Hughes, for fear some of the participants would use the occasion to read poetry critical of the war against Iraq (Pollitt, par. 1). "There is nothing political about American literature," Laura Bush has said." (Pollitt, par. 5). On one hand, such activities seek to acknowledge poetry's insider role in the shaping of American culture, and on the other hand, they reinforce poetry's outsider status, even subversive status, when officials attempt to bring verse in from the cold. In planning and then canceling the White House symposium on American poetry, Laura Bush was both acknowledging that poetry makes a significant difference in our lives and culture and that poetry can be made peripheral or exterior to the most important business at hand when it clashes with other discourses and other agendas. As I write this, in April 2003, students across my campus prepare for

final examinations, mostly unaware of the “April is Poetry Month” flyer on my office door.

It should not surprise us that we encounter an analogous situation in the academy. Poetry and poets are tolerated if they keep to their place. Poetry is perceived as immaterial to the goals of the modern, corporate-connected, government-sponsored university. Attempts to place poetic discourse in conversation with other discourses about academic values and practices are often viewed as irrelevant, coddling, subversive, or silly. The poets invited to the White House symposium were in a “high stakes” situation, but student poets need to be in “low stakes” situations when they write poems in the disciplines, because many must summon the courage to imagine and to compose what others may view as irrelevant or silly. When stepping out in such a way is rewarded by hearers, viewers, and readers with surprise, delight, engagement, and even applause, platitudes about the rewards for the writer as risk taker are confirmed for many reluctant writers of poetry as well as of functional prose.

So why encourage student writers, who are outsiders to academic discourse but seeking proficiency and therefore insider status, and who likewise are not very familiar with poetic discourse, to experiment with poetic language in an academic context? Students may initially be alienated from poetic discourse even as they are alienated from disciplinary discourse, but encouraging students to write poetry about disciplinary knowledge and interdisciplinary connections, and about social, ethical, and rhetorical understandings, broadens their repertoire of language tools for thinking and communicating.

As an interdisciplinary, collaborative enterprise, WAC generates active learning and interactive teaching and runs against the grain of educational practices that primarily seek to fill up empty containers by sifting in the knowledge of the discipline a little at a time. WAC already does important work from its outsider status within the academy’s business as usual, so why should we go even further “out” and risk provoking a backlash that might jeopardize whatever success and limited insider status a WAC program enjoys? Why incorporate into WAC a commitment to both coherent communication *and* language play, to both critical inquiry *and* imaginative speculation? In an academy that values effective prose that is transparent, uncomplicated, serious, complacent, and

above all, free of errors, why introduce the writing of poetic language that often calls attention to itself as dense, intense, ambiguous, unsettling, metaphorical, ironic, playful, and resistant—making unusual demands on writers and readers?

Although an emphasis on exploratory writing in all disciplines resists education as usual, a case for the utility of poetry as a mode of discourse across the disciplines may be emerging. There is no denying that when we think about genre, particularly in the context of transferring language and problem-solving abilities from course to course and from school to work, poetry is not a genre biologists write in the academy or in the workplace. To ask future biologists to write poetry in biology courses seems counter-intuitive.

This issue of *LLAD* ventures into the counter-intuitive and explores from theoretical, programmatic, and pedagogical perspectives what happens and what might happen when we include the writing of poetry as a component of a WAC initiative. The writers in this issue introduce and develop the argument for including the poetic function of language in WAC programs and pedagogy. For you, our readers, the counter-intuitive nature of this discussion may require “a willing suspension of disbelief,” but we invite you to read, reflect, and then join our inquiry into the purposes for writing within the academy and the possibility that poetic language may help us fulfill those purposes.

The primary goal of PAC is to develop students' writing abilities, imaginative faculties, and critical capacities by engaging disciplinary knowledge and experience with poetic language. The writers in this issue suggest numerous reasons why a teacher might productively assign students to write poetry for disciplinary purposes; however, two reasons are central: 1) because poetic writing is a unique and effective tool for learning course material, or what I call a writing-across-the-curriculum rationale; and 2) because poetic writing is a tool for thinking and expression outside the discourse conventions of the discipline, or what I call a writing-against-the-curriculum rationale.

### **Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Rationale for Poetry Writing**

Poetry can be used as a tool for learning in much the way that other genres, such as journals and discussion boards, are used. Poems share generative characteristics with these

and other writing-to-learn activities because they are brief, informal, personal, often interactive, and usually not awarded a specific grade. On the other hand, the poems can readily lead to public performance and publication in print and on the web. Poetic writing activities give students opportunities to reflect on the value of new knowledge and experiences. And when such activities are made social by sharing in groups or at public readings, they often enable students and teachers to build classroom communities based on a respect for language and on a connection to texts and to each other in which further learning and growth occurs, sometimes in surprising ways. Poetry writers and their readers forge new connections in order to create meaning in classrooms around imaginative texts written in response to disciplinary prompts and problems. In one sense, for teachers of writing-intensive courses to require their students to write poetry is to use a genre, unconventional to academic discourse, in support of conventional WAC goals.

Student poets often take unfamiliar course content and reflect, remember, empathize, discover, critique, and contextualize. Many use poetry to produce a psychic and rhetorical distance from course content in order to make anew the ordering of the world they perceive. Some student poets claim that writing poetry produces thinking that is outside the box. They say poetry provides them with a freedom to express themselves that other assignments do not offer—they write such poetry for their own sake, not for the teacher's sake, or the discipline's sake, or the grade book's sake. In developing their imagination through writing, they often find a new respect for written and oral language and for those who produce it, including, they report with surprise, themselves. In the pages that follow you will read the works of many of these students as they use poetic language to grapple with knowledge and experience in academic and disciplinary contexts. In the e-mail exchange that concludes this issue, Alice Fulton and Roald Hoffmann, two well-known scholars and poets, agree that "writing poetry is the best way to teach people to love language and words." And teaching people to love language and words is an admirable goal for a WAC program.

## **Writing-Against-the-Curriculum Rationale for Poetry Writing**

Jonathan Monroe in this issue identifies poetry as an “anti-discipline,” which I take to mean existing in opposition to disciplinarity. Writing poetry may also be a way to temporarily step outside the discipline while being in the discipline—to use an unconventional genre in support of unconventional disciplinary goals. One such goal may be to reflect on those attributes of a discipline that are not usually critically examined within classroom contexts—a discipline’s invisible values of inclusion and exclusion, of knowledge and belief, of sanction and dissent. Poetry exists on the far margins of most disciplines and that may make it a valuable asset to WAC programs who serve undergraduate students who often feel situated similarly. To write in the discipline is to follow disciplinary conventions for the communication of information and knowledge and thus to focus and limit what can be written and how it can be written. To write against the curriculum is to choose a non-disciplinary convention, in this case poetry, to express and remake disciplinary knowledge and values in different contexts. From writing such poetry emerges the freedom of expression that comes from not being accountable to disciplinary discourse expectations. In imaginatively exploring this freedom, poets sometimes offer to classmates, their professors, and others new and unexpected insights and perspectives on disciplinary conversations.

Writing poetry about knowledge learned in academic courses creates ways for that knowledge to be in the world and to remake the writer’s world based on new information and experience. Writing poetry focuses on language and on seeing new possibilities by rearranging language. As Alice Fulton says in this volume “poems don’t exist to provide information,” thus distinguishing them from scientific articles. She continues: “perhaps they exist to provide an experience, cerebral or emotive.” In providing experiences for writers and readers in response to information, poems may suggest an accessible cross-disciplinary discourse for reflecting and imagining and for integrating and probing highly specialized informative and persuasive disciplinary discourse. Because the poetic is a unique function of language, it appears beside-the-point in an information society, and yet this same outsider status enables the poetic to function across fields of knowledge because it does not directly participate in any field’s

intellectual and social culture. Thus, several of the contributors to this collection argue for the cultural work that poetry writing might do in our classrooms and in broader social contexts, thus arguing for poetry's connection to democracy and civic responsibility as well as to self discovery and artful expression.

### **Briefly, What You'll Read in This Issue**

Taken together, the pieces in this collection both suggest and question the uses of poetry writing across and against the curriculum in theory, in practice, in programs, and in the language and learning of ordinary students and teachers.

The first article, "Poetry Across the Curriculum: Four Disciplinary Perspectives," describes a poetry initiative that is a part of a mature communication-across-the-curriculum program founded in 1989. The poetry project at Clemson University is three-years old and involves twenty to thirty faculty from numerous disciplines. Young, Connor-Greene, Waldvogel and Paul represent four disciplines (literature, psychology, biology, and humanities), and together they explain the overall purpose of their program and then each individually illustrates through an analysis of student poetry why he or she assigns, reads, and responds to the poems.

James Britton's work is the theoretical basis of Clemson's program, and in the next article Rosemary Winslow provides a provocative critique of Britton's theory of the poetic as "spectator role" writing. In "Poetry's Place and the Poet's Participation with Fields of Knowledge," Winslow argues that Britton's use of the term "spectator" to refer to the poetic function is unfortunate. According to Winslow, Wolfgang Iser's theories provide a clearer understanding of poetry's role in learning and in self and cultural renewal.

"'Because His Shell is Empty': Writing Poems about Biology" by Richardson, Shetlar, and Shetlar describes a WAC project that links biology courses with a composition course in which students write poetry in order to learn biology and biological processes studied in introductory and sophomore-level biology courses. The authors stress the connection between scientific and artistic creativity, emphasizing close observation, exploring analogies, ethical perspectives, and precision of language. They also include assignments and thoughtful readings of several engaging student poems about

such issues as cloning, genetic mapping, and cellular respiration.

After reading the stories of her students who wrote about working as lifeguards at Chicago-area pools, Elizabeth A. Hatmaker provides us with a personal, probing essay that theorizes possibilities for the poetic in the cross-disciplinary construction of knowledge. In "City Confidential: On the Lyric Mapping of Urban Space," Hatmaker suggests "a space for the development of the cross-curricular lyric voice, for thinking about the ways in which poetry (and the traditions that produce it) can feasibly be applied to conversations in the fields of postmodern geography, critical cartography, and urban studies. In doing so, she acknowledges the tension of the narcissistic "I" in some lyric poetry, but, using the metaphor of lyric mapping, she provides a strong rationale for students and teachers to enter the postmodern lyric landscape inhabited by academics and poets.

Our next section includes many student poems in which a sense of "place," whether a beach, a downtown, or a wildlife preserve, is essential to understanding the experience of the poem. This anthology, "Oh that wonderful stuff: Selected Poetry by College and Middle School Students," edited by Shawn Apostel, includes poems by Clemson University students written in biology, business statistics, chemistry, psychology, and women's studies courses. These poems are followed by three from sixth graders at The Park School in Baltimore about their research and experiences on Assateague, a barrier island off the coast of Virginia and Maryland.

These children's poems were written by students of Nancy Abrams and Nadine Feiler. "Greater than the Sum of Parts: A Poetry/Science Collaboration" describes a middle school collaboration between science and language arts teachers and students. This project began with a familiar scenario: the science students would perform research and write reports and the language arts students would help revise and edit them. This one-sided collaboration, in which language arts students served the science students, evolved into a more fruitful collaboration when both classes agreed to do research on barrier islands and to write poems about their research. Students in both classes learned information, processes, and skills important to both poets and scientists, such as ecological theory, close observation, metaphorical thinking, and research and language development; they also learned how to



use science in writing poetry and to use poetic language and thinking to study science. This close relationship between science and poetry as seen in these sixth grade classes is also an important topic of discussion for Alice Fulton and Roald Hoffmann, both respected poets, in the last article in this collection.

Steve Westbrook focuses on the discipline of English in “‘Plerk,’ ‘Plabor,’ and a Conventional Caper: Redefining the Work and Play of Poetry Within the Discipline of English.” He provides one answer to the question: if English had one course in which to introduce students to writing in English, perhaps similar to other writing-in-the-disciplines courses like “Writing in Psychology” or “Writing in History,” what should it look like? Drawing upon the scholarship of Wendy Bishop, Hans Ostrom, and John Trimbur, Westbrook argues for a course which centers on creative writing, academic writing, and comparisons between the two. English majors should investigate the intellectual and cultural work performed by both the poetic and the transactional function. Within most English departments, poetic writing is theorized as stylistic play and academic writing as cultural work, and they often have separate faculties, ideologies, and curricula. But as Westbrook’s title (Plerk, Plabor) suggests, perhaps a “Writing in English” course should bring these two separate disciplines into conversation.

“Unsettling Knowledge: A Poetry/Science Trialogue” by Jonathan Monroe, Alice Fulton, and Roald Hoffmann is a collage of poetry and prose with three distinct voices exploring what, if anything, poetry has to say to science and vice versa. Each writer, all of whom are poets as well as scholars, examines the connection of poetry to scientific inquiry via essay and email exchange, playfully and seriously, in poetry and in prose, in dialogue and in triologue. At some cognitive level, is there a natural and productive connection between the making of poetry and science? Or is poetry fundamentally unsettling, necessarily against the grain? We know in general terms what science is for and what the scientist does for society; but what do poets do for society? Monroe, a comparative literature scholar and writing program administrator sets out such questions and joins Alice Fulton, a MacArthur prize-winning poet, and Roald Hoffmann, a Nobel prize-winning chemist, in generating answers and speculations from their respective and differing perspectives. What

is most strategic about this insightful collage, and why it concludes this special issue, is its insistence that poetry find ways to open up dialogues with science and other fields of knowledge rather than participate in its own marginalization from scientific and cultural work. Through such cross-disciplinary inquiry and conversation, we may be able to envision and enact a participatory role for poetry in general education and disciplinary education.

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