

The Reluctant Participant

Annik Bilodeau, University of Waterloo, Canada

ABSTRACT

This piece is a creative reflection on my experience with Pop-Up Poetry at the 2024 SoTL Symposium in Banff, in which I consider the intersection of identity, academia, care, and community.

Keywords: poetry, identity, academia, care, SoTL community

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29173/isotl868>

The first time I sat down to write my response to Pop-Up Poetry, I didn't even recall the word I'd been asked to give the poet. I stared at the poem, reading it multiple times, yet I couldn't pinpoint the word. "But I spent so much time agonizing over selecting the right word," I chastised myself. Had my state of mind so dramatically shifted between early November and late February that I had somehow overcome the angst weighing me down then? To the point of not remembering the word? The shift from doom and gloom to mild optimism would have been quite the feat.

I approached Pop-Up Poetry almost as a therapy session. I figured that to write good poetry, you must be willing to look into yourself. Logically, then, to get a good poem, you probably need to be willing to let the poet peer into your soul. I was not. As I settled down to write this reflection, all I could muster was my annoyance at the poet's probing questions, his intrusiveness, my initial apprehensiveness at being vulnerable in front of a smiling stranger and at diving too much into anything of substance, anything that would elicit inspiration in a poet. It slowly dawned on me that reflecting on my experience at Pop-Up Poetry might be as emotionally demanding as sitting in front of the poet had been.

The first time I attended the SoTL Symposium, in 2023, I did not stand in line to get a poem. The queues were always too long—the attendees swarming the poets at every possible opportunity. There was never enough time during a break. There was always someone new to meet and connections to make. I didn't make Pop-Up Poetry a priority.

The concept sounded interesting. Before moving into educational development, I was a literary studies scholar. While I focused on narratives rather than poetry, I was always intrigued by a poet's ability to capture the very essence of emotions, to create worlds in so few words. (Don't be surprised that my first instinct was to analyze my poem, not to analyze what it said about me.)

This year, I let myself be convinced by a new friend that I "absolutely needed" (her words) to get a poem. I was skeptical that it would be the transformative experience that everyone was promising. I was going to sit in front of someone for 15 minutes, and they would get to know enough about me to write a poem that spoke to me—only me—and stay away from generalities? Call me cynical, but I was not buying it. Frame it as disciplinary bias, but I firmly believe that good writing takes time. Insightful writing in 15 minutes? Come on!

Anyone who knows me even a little could have easily called my bluff. Thankfully, I was alone in Banff. The colleague who attended the symposium with me the year before would probably have been bold enough to point out that I was likely scared of what the poem would say. An attentive reader might even be tempted to point out, 500 words into this creative response, that I have yet to actually share the word around which this piece revolves. Some might even think that I'm stalling. They wouldn't be wrong.

To be on the other side of the analytical lens was very uncomfortable for me—an open-heart surgery without anaesthesia while wide awake. Vulnerability is not my strong suit.

The first sign of vulnerability was the word I chose: “disruption.” It crossed my lips and everything it carried suddenly became real. As the poor poet, never losing his cool, relentlessly kept probing, my mind was racing: “Graduate studies didn’t prepare me to talk about my emotions. I study stories. I’m not supposed to star in them!”

Sitting in front of the poet was torture. Don’t get me wrong, he was very kind. There was no ill intent on his side. He was just given a reluctant participant. “What does the word mean to you?” he asked. “Are disruptions necessarily negative?” “Do you think you’re a disrupter?” “Why do you think it’s important to disrupt?” I was the one spewing platitudes. I understand, intellectually at least, that Pop-Up Poetry is a relational, reciprocal endeavour—a co-creation. However good, the poet doesn’t stand a chance if the person sitting on the other side of the typewriter doesn’t cooperate. I was unwilling to be material for the poem. Until I gave in.

At some point (the poet’s fifteenth attempt at getting something out of me?), I realized that whether I wanted to or not, by sitting down in front of the typewriter, I had tacitly agreed to be exposed. I had to own how deflated I felt about my life and the state of the world. As long as my internal monologue only lived in my head, it could be brushed aside. Saying these words out loud would solidify them into truths, and the poem would create a record of a state of mind I was not exactly proud of.

My excitement at spending time in Banff lived alongside existential dread. I was reeling from Trump’s election a few days before. I was numb, in a fog. While the SoTL Symposium in 2023 had pushed away the grey of November in Ontario and acted as a great reset during the fall semester, being in Banff felt heavy this year. (What an odd thing to think. Banff is a treat, even amid chaos.) However great I knew they were, being surrounded by people as I believed that the world was shattering around me was almost too much to handle.

I chose “disruption” for a few reasons. It’s part of the title of an event I organize for work (no material for great poetry there). The poet smiled as if to say, “keep digging.”

“Disrupted” describes the state of my professional life since leaving a faculty position and being thrown into educational development in 2023. Now we’re onto something.

I didn't set out to be an educational developer. I wanted to teach, of course. Given the state of the Arts and Humanities in North America, it's unsurprising that I ended up where I am today. I'm very lucky to be where I landed. I don't think I could have found a better place to figure out the rest of my life, but it doesn't change the fact that I didn't choose this next career. I didn't plan for this. I'm training in a new discipline all over again, and I don't know where it will take me.

Taking stock of the past two years, I must admit that this disruption to my carefully-designed master plan turned out great. I'm in a much better place right now, both professionally and mentally. But I have no clue what I'm doing most of the time.

I like to think that I've always had a rebellious streak. I don't want to conform, yet I do. But I still question everything. Over the years, many academic spaces encouraged me to make myself smaller. I've been told to know my place, first as a student, as a young female scholar, then as a non-tenure-track faculty member, now as a staff member. Don't disrupt the established order. Don't stir the pot. Don't tell very important people that they might be wrong, that they don't hold all the truths. Don't care too much about teaching. Think of your career first.

What career now?

I have slowly come to realize that, in the educational development community, we all have a bit of the rebel in us. We manage disruption with grace, maybe even breed and foster it. We also step up to care for people during disruptive times. That's what the 2024 SoTL Symposium did for me. Probably in spite of me. Being in Banff forced me to pause, to revel in 20-degree-Celsius weather, to forge new friendships, to acknowledge the road walked.

I have learned over the past two years that disruption is not chaos; there is order to be found in the mayhem. It's only now, as I sit to write this response, that I realize it took me all this time to come to terms with it.

It also took a poem.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Annik Bilodeau, annik.bilodeau@uwaterloo.ca, is an Educational Developer, Research and Consulting, at the University of Waterloo's Centre for Teaching Excellence. Her research focuses on feminist pedagogies and trauma-informed teaching, and on feminist street art and activism about gender-based violence and reproductive rights in Mexico, Chile, and Argentina.