

A poetic approach to science communication

Reviewed Book

ILLINGWORTH, S. (2022).
SCIENCE COMMUNICATION THROUGH POETRY.
CHAM, SWITZERLAND: SPRINGER NATURE

Reviewed by

Emma Weitkamp

Abstract

Science Communication Through Poetry, by Sam Illingworth offers a practical guide for the aspiring science communication poet or those interested in working with poetry as a research tool or public engagement method.

Keywords

Science and technology, art and literature; Science writing

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Sam Illingworth starts this book with a question that is asked of many approaches to science communication that involve the arts: 'is the best way to diversify science and stop it from ostracising, excluding, alienating to use a medium which is perceived by many to be similarly ostracising, excluding and alienating?' While acknowledging this concern, it is not the primary focus of this text. Instead, this book sets out to explore for the reader the potential uses of poetry within the field of science communication, both as a tool for communicating science and as a research method. This latter is perhaps of more interest to Illingworth and forms a key aspect of the latter chapters. Nevertheless, concerns about the accessibility of poetry are clearly at the back of Illingworth's mind as he first seeks to help the reader become comfortable with their own ability as a poet, using an approach he refers to as RAW (reading, analysing, writing). Chapter 3 builds on the reader's emerging confidence with poetry to explore different types of poems and the important concept of rhythm. Readers are encouraged to play with rhythm and to think about different styles of poetry with a particular look at kyrielle, a French style of rhyming poem, the Shakespearean sonnet, with its iambic pentameter structure, and the Pantoum, a form of Malaysians poetry. He argues that these three types of poem will help the new poet to develop their own sense of rhythm. Illingworth also makes the important point that poetry is designed to be read out loud and that listening and reading aloud can help develop your sense of rhythm.

From this basis, the reader is introduced to several different ways that poetry could be used as a research method in science communication. All the methods proposed

are qualitative in nature and some may be familiar to scholars in other contexts. Chapter 4, for example, introduces the idea of qualitative content analysis, a method widely applied to research in science communication, whether that is to analyse published texts, such as news stories, or interview transcripts. In this context, poetry can be seen as simply another source of data. However, for those teaching research methods at undergraduate or postgraduate level, the description of content analysis provided by Illingworth is certainly readable and could be applied to other textual forms. Personally, I was more interested in chapter 5 which introduces poetic transcription. I suspect a level of confidence in poetry writing may be needed before attempting this method which translates narratives identified from text based sources into poems. Illingworth suggests a range of potential data sources that could be used and provides worked examples to help those new to this method.

Chapters 6 and 7 move on to consider the potential of poetry in facilitating dialogue between scientists and publics, either directly through collaborative workshops or indirectly through collaborations between scientists and artists. Collaborative poetry workshops are suggested as a means through which the hierarchies that often exist between scientists and publics can be levelled. The principle here is that neither scientists nor publics may be particularly expert in poetry writing, thereby enabling all parties to share and 'express knowledge and opinions without the fear of appraisal' [p. 118]. Illingworth suggests that poetry helps to create a 'safe space' that can be used to nurture dialogue. The chapter outlines a process for the design of such workshops and the principles that need to be followed to ensure their success.

Finally, the book moves on to consider the relationship between scientists and poets and the potential that collaborative work might offer to the practice of science communication. In this chapter, Illingworth provides a manifesto for poetic collaborations designed to help facilitate effective relationships. This manifesto addresses common criticisms of the instrumental use of the arts [see also Weitkamp & Almeida, 2022; Rogers, Halpern, Hannah & de Ridder-Vignone, 2021] within the field of science communication by explicitly focusing on this relationship at the outset of any project. As in the other chapters Illingworth provides worked examples to support the development of such projects.

I particularly enjoyed the short, directed tasks provided in each chapter. These address different aspects of working with poetry in a practice or research context, but importantly they help the novice, who may be working with poetry for the first time, to explore this emerging field. This practical approach may make this book particularly appealing to those working with students as the writing is clear and the examples are well presented. I will certainly recommend the two chapters exploring research methods to my dissertation students as they clearly explain importance of research questions and objectives, and how to create these. The clear language used to explain how to perform a content analysis means this chapter will be on my reading list. Although aimed at beginners working with poetry for the first time, further reading is suggested in each chapter, enabling the reader to move beyond this introduction and develop their practices.

References

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Author

Emma Weitkamp is Professor in Science Communication at the University of the West of England Bristol, where she teaches on the MSc in Science Communication. Her research interests centre on science and arts. She is the author of three books.

    emma.weitkamp@uwe.ac.uk.

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