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Examining Early Career Faculty Experiences through Found Poetry

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Article abstract

Transitioning from graduate student to early career faculty can often provoke uncertainty and questioning. This study explores the rhetorical and revealing nature of such questioning (i.e., Am I really this lost? Am I in the right place?). Utilizing methods from arts based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012), specifically poetic inquiry (Prendergast et al., 2009; Richardson, 1992), we created found poetry around rhetorical questions from our existing collaborative autoethnographic journal. We frame our findings with a selection of poems to provide insight into our lived experiences of transition. The question poems illustrate that our first year as assistant professors were preoccupied with managing tasks, balancing work, avoiding burnout, building relationships, and discovering how to belong in the new context. While rhetorical questions do not necessarily produce answers, questioning in a collaborative space allowed us to explore the struggle, complexity, and ambiguity of academic identity construction as early career faculty.

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RHETORICAL QUESTIONS AND RUMINATIONS: EXAMINING EARLY CAREER FACULTY EXPERIENCES THROUGH FOUND POETRY

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Abstract: Transitioning from graduate student to early career faculty can often provoke uncertainty and questioning. This study explores the rhetorical and revealing nature of such questioning (i.e., Am I really this lost? Am I in the right place?). Utilizing methods

from arts based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012), specifically poetic inquiry (Prendergast et al., 2009; Richardson, 1992), we created found poetry around rhetorical questions from our existing collaborative autoethnographic journal. We frame our findings with a selection of poems to provide insight into our lived experiences of transition. The question poems illustrate that our first year as assistant professors were preoccupied with managing tasks, balancing work, avoiding burnout, building relationships, and discovering how to belong in the new context. While rhetorical questions do not necessarily produce answers, questioning in a collaborative space allowed us to explore the struggle, complexity, and ambiguity of academic identity construction as early career faculty.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; early career faculty; faculty experience; arts based research; higher education; questions

The process of transitioning from doctoral student to early career faculty can provoke moments of conflict and questioning (Reybold, 2003, 2005; Stupnisky et al., 2015). While Golde (1998) claims doctoral socialization occurs as a double socialization process (a student is concurrently socialized for both the graduate and faculty experience), others contend that the graduate socialization process is incomplete (Crooks & Castleden, 2012). The socialization process for early career faculty potentially generates stress and anxiety (Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008) and can be characterized by uncertainty and questioning (Reybold, 2005). Higher education scholars exploring first-year faculty experiences found conflict emerges when early career faculty search for balance (Lester, 2016), navigate collegial relationships (Watts & Robertson, 2011), manage stress (Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008), and seek to define ambiguous job demands (Sabagh et al., 2018). The questions posed during the stressful transition, often deeply personal, reveal key issues related to the early career faculty experience.

In a previous collaborative autoethnographic study, we explored the presence of conflict, or what we termed dissonance, in our transition from doctoral student to early career faculty at comprehensive, teaching institutions in the United States (McCormick & Willcox, 2019). Due to the rapidly changing landscape of academia (Helm et al., 2012; Jaschik, 2016), doctoral students cannot be prepared for every professional position offered to them, which indicates a gap in preparation. Our previous findings indicated that due to this inevitable gap in preparation, we engaged in deconstructing and reconstructing our academic identities to accommodate new academic contexts. In analyzing the data from the original study, we recognized our collaborative journal contained a multitude of questions: *This is what it is? Where does that leave me? Am I where I belong?* These questions were brief, yet prime examples of the dissonance we experienced as first-year faculty.

Research Goals

Figure 1

Am I Really This Lost?

Am I really this lost?

I'm feeling untethered--like I lost my anchor and am drifting
That's not like me

I love the people I work with

Where I am now - here- I'm not with all my heart.

Why am I so reluctant to write?
Why have I not spent my funding yet?
Why have I not applied for an IRB?
What is wrong with me?

I can't just pick up my life
move to a new place with calmer water

I feel like an anchor would be worthless
I worry that I will drift for too long

Am I really this lost?

While our initial publication focused on dissonance in academic transition, the purpose of this article is to describe how rhetorical questions have the potential to reveal what is missing or backgrounded in early career faculty experiences. Specifically, we asked: how and to what extent do rhetorical questions from our collaborative autoethnographic journal illustrate the nature of the early career faculty experience? When investigating this research question, two other questions emerged: 1) How, and to what extent, does engaging in collective poetic inquiry provide an enhanced understanding of the early career faculty experience? and 2) How might examination of rhetorical questions invite critical reflection about conflict experienced in the early faculty experience?

The project discussed here took place during the 2017–2018 school year, however, our friendship and interest in research collaboration began in 2013 during our doctoral education at a Midwest research-intensive university. After defending our dissertations and navigating the job market at the same time, we maintained our connection as we began assistant professor positions at two different teaching-intensive universities. In the first month of our tenure-track experiences, we had regular conversations about the nature of our new academic contexts and began an informal collaborative journaling ritual that took place weekly in a shared Google Doc.

Below, we share found poetry generated from the rhetorical questions posed during our first year as assistant professors, and we explore the resulting analyses from our poetic process using literature about faculty experience. We are not the first to explore the early career faculty experience (e.g., Coke et al., 3015; Guyotte et al., 2018), nor are we the first to use poetic inquiry in higher education (e.g., Jones, 2010; Pillay et al., 2017), but we suggest this poetic account further illuminates the nature of the early career faculty experience.

The Potential of Questions

Riegle (1976), an education scholar, identified four question types: interrogative, declarative, rhetorical, and ambiguous. While most questions seek an answer (i.e., interrogative questions), rhetorical questions (RQs) are framed in a way that neither seeks information nor requests a response (Gutiérrez-Rexach, 1997; Ladusaw, 1980). Koshik (2005) further describes that RQs function to make a claim or assertion. Our understanding of RQs moves beyond these linguistic definitions. We argue RQs are meaningful in the context in which they are posed and have the potential to illuminate vulnerable moments, invite empathetic witnessing of each other's experiences, and provoke critical reflection.

In the context of this project, we noticed that our collaborative journal included 60 RQs. When extracted from the journal and aggregated into a list, they still captured the essential feelings of our first year as assistant professors. Thus, we contend that RQs provide powerful opportunities to explore early career faculty experiences. For example, in the poem in Figure 1, we pose several RQs and end with the eponymous question, "Am I really this lost?" We used this specific RQ to illustrate grappling with the new academic context (e.g., feeling untethered, reluctant to write and spend funding, hesitant to conduct research). This question, originally posed in the journal, was not necessarily addressed to a specific person, but nonetheless, the co-authors reflected upon the question through their own experience (e.g., feelings of belonging, motivation, uncertainty, and security). This question, like many others we posed, was simply written, yet it instigated complex responses. Given the fertile nature and complex meaning of

RQs, we engaged in an arts based research study. Below, we share our methodology and findings.

Methodology

This research project is embedded in a feminist ethical stance in which we believe 1) women's experiences are legitimate forms of knowledge; 2) pluralistic perspectives allow greater understanding of experience; and, 3) power dynamics are complex and continuously negotiated (Ackerly, 2008; Hesse-Biber, 2014). Given this stance, we believe knowledge is co-constructed and contextual (Burr, 2003), and it must be examined for assumptions and taken-for-granted truths (Hesse-Biber, 2014). With this philosophical approach, we believe the collaborative exploration of phenomena, such as the early-career faculty phase, creates a deeper understanding of experience. Specifically, arts based research and poetic inquiry emphasize subjective and intersubjective knowledge and communicate the ineffable. Jones (2010) states, it "focuses on the particular and the personal in a way that lays open some of the essentially human and indeed private moments of academic life" (p. 604). We used poetic inquiry to explore how rhetorical questions illustrate the nature of the early career faculty experience. In this section, we describe our methodological decisions and analytical approach.

Arts Based Research

Arts based research (ABR) is a methodology that embraces the connection between artistic practice and inquiry to evoke and promote new understandings of the world. We adopted this methodological approach because it embraces epistemological diversity and honors the aesthetic nature of research (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2017; Rolling, 2013). ABR embraces the ineffable, multi-sensorial ways of knowing such as dance, music, visuals, numbers, poetry, and more (Leavy, 2017, p. 4; Rolling, 2013, p. 5). Barone and Eisner (2012) state that "arts based research is not a literal description of a state of affairs; it is an evocative and emotionally drenched expression that makes it possible to know how others feel" (p. 9). ABR moves beyond seemingly objective, sterile descriptions of experience and seeks to re-present understanding in a way that communicates aesthetically. Whether this is through performance, visuals, or poetry, ABR seeks to promote, provoke, and evoke a deeper, more complex understanding of human experience (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008). Using the affective nature of the arts, ABR invites others to re-examine the world and see it in a new light, engender conversation, and ask new questions. Barone and Eisner (2012) state, "Arts based research is based on the notion that any perspective on the world is always partial and therefore incomplete" (p. 166). Thus, we used a literary form of arts based research, poetic inquiry, to invite others into our experiences as early career faculty.

Poetic Inquiry

Prendergast (2009) offers the term *poetic inquiry* as an umbrella for the many poetic approaches used to re-present experience. As a methodological approach, poetic inquiry has a growing history in the social sciences, including sociology (Richardson, 1992), education (Cahnmann, 2003; Santoro & Kamler, 2001), health services (Furman, 2006), anthropology (Rothenburg, 1994) and more. Prendergast (2009) concludes that there are 29 "ways of looking at poetic inquiry" and each illuminates the characteristics or potential of this methodological form. Of the 29 "ways," perhaps most significant to the current project is that poetic inquiry "is always interested in expressing human experience, whether that of Self or Other or both" (Prendergast, 2009, p. 562). Given that the current study draws from a collaborative project, we chose to use poetic inquiry to examine our early career faculty experiences.

More specifically, we employed the poetic inquiry approach of generating found poems (Butler-Kisber, 2010) to explore the rhetorical questions present in our year-long collaborative journal. Found poetry is "the rearrangement of words, phrases, and sometimes whole passages that are taken from other sources and reframed as poetry by changes in spacing and/or lines (and consequently meaning), or by altering the text by additions and/or deletions" (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 84). Words and phrases were pulled from our shared journal created in our prior collaborative autoethnographic research study. This process of weaving together individual experiences to produce intersubjective meaning is described as collective poetic inquiry (Pillay et al., 2017; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2014). Collective poetic inquiry honors different experiences and makes different ways of knowing transparent (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2014).

Collaboratively engaging in poetic inquiry, we chose to generate found poetry that highlights our intersubjective experiences. In the next section, we explain our process of generating found poems from pre-existing data to re-present our experiences during our first year as assistant professors.

Poetic Process

We used a six-stage poetic inquiry process: 1) sift original data to identify all questions, 2) identify the rhetorical questions, 3) explore the RQ's context in the original data, 4) generate poems from data, 5) co-revise poems to ensure an accurate representation of experience, and 6) analyze poems using existing literature about early career faculty experiences. In the first stage, we re-examined the data from our collaborative autoethnographic journal and identified a total of 70 questions posed, including those with an interrogative function (i.e., Did you see we got accepted?), rhetorical function (i.e., If that doesn't say white, patriarchal power, what does?), and

those of ambiguity (i.e., What happens when our numbers are too low – will my job be in jeopardy?).

Noticing the majority of questions posed had a rhetorical function (n = 60), we sorted out the rhetorical questions from the original list in the second stage. Third, we located the RQs in the original text to understand the context in which the questions were posed. In the fourth stage, we chose the most provocative rhetorical questions as anchors and starting points for each found poem. We then found additional text fragments to complement the question. The poems were composed by rearranging our written words to re-create the "episodes, epiphanies, misfortunes, [and] pleasures" (Richardson, 2003, p. 197) of the experience. We wrote in a way that added visual space to move back-and-forth between speakers, to indicate a new stanza, and to highlight dramatic pauses to build tension for the next space. Leggo (2008) articulated that poetry "creates textural spaces that invite and create ways of knowing" (p. 167). Those purposeful spaces were intended to create opportunities for a reader to engage with the poem's nuance emotionally and intellectually.

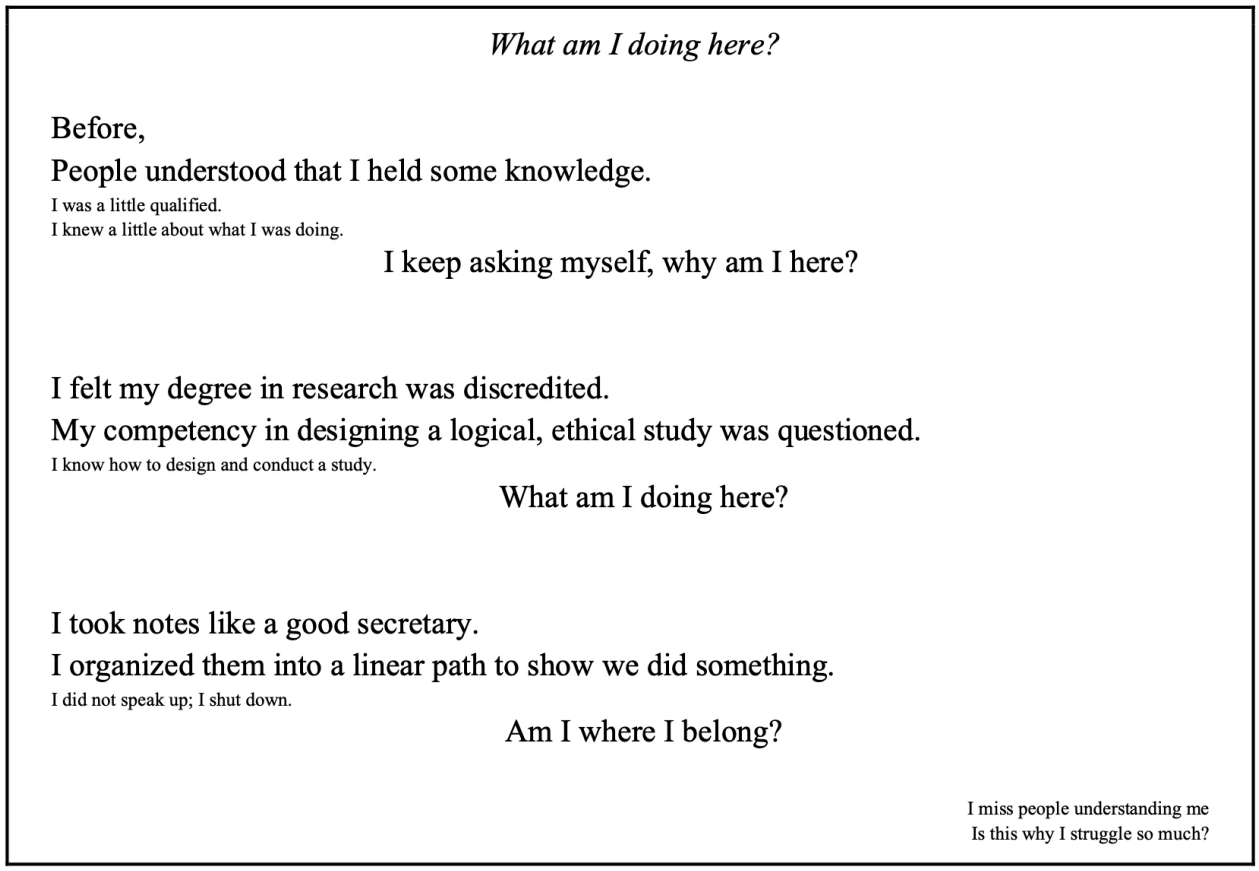
To ensure an authentic representation of our experiences, stage five consisted of collaboratively revisiting and revising each poem. This stage functioned as a member-checking tool and elicited conversations about the degree of vulnerability shared with the public. In the final stage, we used existing literature as a lens for analyzing the intersubjective meaning derived from each poem. We started by discussing the poems and identifying themes that emerged. We then sought literature to connect our experiences to prior research and to deepen our own understanding. In summary, we engaged in poetic inquiry to empathetically participate in deconstructing our experiences and help others understand the nature of the early career faculty experience.

Findings and Presentation of Poems

Recognizing that the transition from graduate student to faculty was characterized by internal and external conflict, the rhetorical questions in our collaborative journal became an entry point to understanding the complexity of this experience.

Figure 2

What am I Doing Here?



The poem “What am I doing here?” (Figure 2), visually and verbally communicates some of the challenges associated with the early career experience such as the frustration of balancing self-assuredness and self-doubt. We visually communicate the balance in this poem using smaller font sizes to indicate whispered moments of vulnerability. These threads run through the poems generated in the poetic inquiry process. In Figures 3–6, we share four poems that provide insight into our lived experience as first-year faculty. Each poem focuses on a particular aspect of conflict experienced in our first year as assistant professors. The rhetorical question poems helped make our experiences transparent and served as an analytical tool to better understand the early career faculty experience as a whole.

10 Balls in the Air, How Could I Drop Them?

Figure 3

10 Balls in the Air, How Could I Drop Them?

10 balls in the air, how could I drop them?
10 balls in the air

a new email with new tasks
too many committees
proposals are due on Friday
striving to lose the dissertation weight
planning, prepping, advising, grading,
emails, emails, emails, emails, assignment review
a conference each month
struggling to keep a chapter ahead
30 observations in 15 weeks

I have not found the time to write
I am behind
no money, no car
breathing and living minute-to-minute

10 balls in the air
How could I drop them?

Each line of the poem in Figure 3 illustrates shared experiences of the mounting pressure to manage expectations in a new context. The strong vertical emphasis and left alignment resembles a list poem culminating in the central question: *10 balls in the air, how could I drop them?* It introduces a juggling metaphor that represents our first-year faculty experience. As more balls, or in our case, responsibilities and expectations, entered the orbit, the more complex the juggling feed and pattern became. When juggling, a juggler experiences a drastic increase in concentration and potential stress

as more balls are handled. In our experience, we were juggling the many expectations of a tenure-track professor at our institutions (e.g., exemplary teaching in numerous new courses). We were also focused on finding balance in our personal lives (i.e., financial, mental, and physical wellness) after a graduate school experience marked by exhaustion and diminished health. The second part of the question: *How could I drop them?* specifically addresses the feeling of juggling goals and expectations that were both personally and professionally important. We felt pressure to maintain our rigorous research trajectories, and at the same time, meet the demands of our teaching and student-oriented institutions. In addition, we also were learning new service roles (i.e., advising students, coordinating programs, and serving on committees). In managing new expectations and new roles, we potentially neglected the bigger picture of long-term career goals and passion for the profession.

The poem highlights the frenetic sense of managing tasks, expectations, and goals. Implicit in our question: *How could I drop them?* is a sense of being overwhelmed with a lack of control. The many "balls" in the air were part of our pathway to tenure; we recognized their importance, yet questioned the degree to which we could control them. We struggled with how to prioritize commitments best, how to perform in new and unexpected roles, and to what degree we could control our job. Crooks and Castleden (2012) explored the null curriculum (Eisner, 1985; Flinders et al., 1986) of graduate school and noted their surprise when discovering that prioritizing and organizing one's time as an early career faculty member is a political endeavor. The process of time prioritization and management results in time spent on important departmental or institutional tasks that potentially outweigh other, equally important, tasks and goals. Coke et al. (2015) further highlighted the inherent dilemma and risk in prioritizing commitments as new roles and responsibilities are embedded with implicit norms and power dynamics. The underlying element illuminated within our question: *10 balls in the air, how could I drop them?* is the frenzied dilemma of time and task management.

Where Does That Leave Me?

Figure 4

Where Does that Leave Me?

Where does that leave me?

I worked so hard
achieving this lifelong goal
becoming a professor
now I'm here
looking around
'*this* is what *it* is?'

teaching classes I'm not fond of
working with others
who know the context
who know the expectations
who know the norms
who have stability...
operating at a pace that's unsustainable….

Where does that leave me?

The poem "Where does that leave me?" (see Figure 4) was constructed around two rhetorical questions: *This is what it is?* and *Where does that leave me?* The first question reveals a disheartening discovery of the mismatch between what we envisioned of the professoriate and what we experienced. Like many others, our graduate program allowed us to gain teaching experience in higher education settings, but primarily focused on developing critical, analytical research skills. The reality of our assistant professor positions, though, emphasized teaching excellence over research productivity. The extended space between the first and second stanza, combined with the italicized text, conveys the emotional weight of the question: *This is what it is?*

The misalignment between our professional goals and expectations with the new context led to the second question posed in the poem: *Where does that leave me?* To meet our own expectations of the career, we felt friction and exhaustion through working at an unsustainable pace. The repetition in the second stanza is highlighted with an

indentation to visually communicate the layers of friction that revealed our knowledge gaps.

As early-career faculty, we struggled to find work-life balance. In our poem, we ask: operating at a pace that is unsustainable… *Where does that leave me?* This right-aligned rhetorical question highlights our struggle to balance personal and professional goals in our new contexts. The pace at which we worked was the norm in graduate school, so we felt the need to continue at that pace to prove ourselves as legitimate, productive members of the faculty (Guillaume et al., 2019). We worked long hours and struggled to build a personal life in our new context. Higher education institutions are known to seek the "ideal worker," who Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2016) describe as a worker "dedicated to the job, meaning that they are not supposed to take into consideration things that are not job-related (i.e., family). Historically, ideal workers have been men" (p. 12). Striving to be the ideal worker and prove our legitimacy, we privileged our careers over all else, leading to an imbalance in our professional and personal lives.

The unsustainable work pace and our questioning of the career path precipitated feelings of burnout. Harrison (1999) describes burnout as a "gradual erosion of [one's] spirit and zest as a result of the daily struggles and chronic stresses that are typical of everyday life and work" (p. 25). In the poem, we illustrate the gradual erosion of our spirit and passion for academia. Emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a growing sense of dissatisfaction are predictors of burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). As new doctoral graduates, we felt established as scholars, yet we needed to prove ourselves again in our new contexts. We were prepared to learn a new context and adapt to the workplace norms, but we were not prepared for the emotional and professional work associated with co-constructing our academic identities in these new spaces (McCormick & Willcox, 2019). This laborious process led to a growing sense of depersonalization. We found that our rhetorical questions: *Where does that leave me?* and *This is what it is?* materialized impending burnout.

I Felt Something, you Know?

Figure 5

I Felt Something, you Know?

I felt something, you know?

The end of the semester is coming quickly
There are demands for summer and fall curricula
I find it maddening
and a little exciting
they think I can do all of this at once

I hear you.

I was told my students would feel overwhelmed with a semester-long project
I was told it would work with grad school, not *our* students
I appreciate the idea of streamlining this course
I am hesitant to cut these students off of individual study
to just boil it down to exercises
I think it could be meaningful beyond exercises

I would have felt the same.

Today was beautiful. I finally felt like me
I grabbed an academic memoir I've been savoring
I empathize with the time and labor that goes into placing words together
I could feel her urgency to get this critique into the world
I want to write like that – with a purpose that moves other people
I felt something, you know?

I had a similar thought the other day.

Next semester
I will teach how I believe will best equip my students
It's time to be me
It's time to find my familiar
instead of being paralyzed by all of this change
I found a home in grad school
I will do this again

I know, right?

The two-voice poem "*I felt something you know?"* (see Figure 5) uses varying alignment to illustrate a conversation between the authors (i.e., left-aligned text represents one author's voice, while the right-aligned text represents the other's). The poem highlights two rhetorical questions and describes feelings of uncertainty about

new work demands and adjusting to life as assistant professors. It captures tensions in adapting to new student populations, the demands of curricula design, finding time to write, and overcoming the paralysis of change. The rhetorical questions also elicit thinking about what was absent in our new academic lives. The first question: *I felt something, you know?* highlights the missing element of excitement and passion and implies that our passion for academia was being challenged. Further, the second question: *I know, right?* served as an affirmation to each other that something was different in these new contexts. The poem (Figure 5) also alludes to moments of self-doubt ("I find it maddening / and a little exciting / they think I can do all of this at once") and detachment ("Today was beautiful. I finally felt like me") and its impact on the author ("…being paralyzed by all of this change"). Together, the questions and the poem's contents illuminate the experience of not feeling like our previous academic selves.

The rhetorical questions in this poem highlight the external and internal pressures felt as early career faculty. Externally, we sensed pressure to develop curriculum at a new pace, we were urged to reconsider our teaching approaches, and implicitly, we felt the creep of the tenure clock. The poem also exhibits internal pressures to respond to and ameliorate our changing academic identities ("It's time to find my familiar"). We reflected on who we once were – ones who researched, wrote, and engaged as teacher-researchers, and who we no longer were. The process of reflecting and questioning one's academic identities is expected in new academic contexts; however, if it reveals characteristics of imposter phenomenon, it is detrimental to academic faculty formation (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017).

Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) described imposter phenomenon (IP) as the inability "to internalize successes despite evidence to the contrary, perfectionistic work tendencies in an attempt to overcompensate for doubts, and the experience of fraudulent feelings" (p. 194). While Clance and Imes (1978) coined the term "imposter phenomenon" by studying high achieving women, Hutchins (2015) examined this phenomenon in relation to higher education faculty. Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) discovered multiple IP triggers in the faculty experience, such as questioning expertise, comparisons with colleagues, and concern with scholarly productivity. Our poem highlights IP triggers where colleagues questioned our expertise in designing curricula for our students ("I was told my students would feel overwhelmed with a semester-long project / I was told it would work with grad school, not *our* students") and times when we compared ourselves to colleagues and academic exemplars ("I want to write like that - with a purpose that moves other people"). Further, we questioned our ability to be productive scholars (i.e., navigating multiple tasks, maintaining work-life balance), as illustrated in the other poems. Writing these found poems allowed us to recognize the nonsensical perfectionist tendencies, the fruitless comparison of ourselves to colleagues, and the irrational concern that our scholarly productivity was not sufficient.

Ultimately, IP triggers existed in our experiences, yet the internalization of those experiences as IP was inhibited through our supportive, collaborative reflections.

Am I in the Right Place?

Figure 6

Am I in the Right Place?

Am I in the right place?

"You know you don't have to be here every day?"
I had colleagues around me telling me to slow down
I assume it's them trying to protect my time
I didn't know how to slow down
What is going on here?

"So, you don't need a Ph.D. to do what you are doing?"
I am haunted by her words
Why am I here?
Am I wasting my time?

"Are you happy?"
I keep thinking back to her question
Happiness?
I don't really believe in it as a construct
I feel supported all of the time here
but rarely feel like I am making a difference
Isn't that odd?

She, again, made me pause…
Am I in the right place?

The poem “Am I in the right place?” (see Figure 6) presents nine questions, all of which convey feelings of not belonging. The first three stanzas of the poem begin with questions posed to us by colleagues and mentors and are followed by indented thoughts and feelings from our journal. These questions, interpreted as rhetorical or interrogative depending on the situation, framed our understanding of our first year as assistant professors. The first stanza articulated a colleague's concern for work-life balance, asking: *You know you don't have to be here every day?* This question revealed dissonance between our personal work habits and the workplace norms at our institutions (“What is going on here?”). The second stanza was framed around a mentor's response to learning about the courses assigned to one of us; she asked: *So, you don't need a Ph.D. to do what you are doing?* This simple question evoked a series of reflective questions about the rightness of fit (“Why am I here?” and “Am I wasting my time?”). Teaching outside of the discipline, with courses tangentially related to our degree, felt as if something was not quite right. The third stanza is framed around a question posed to both of us at a local conference, at which we presented about our student-faculty transition experiences. During the question-and-answer portion of the presentation, a mentor posed the question: *Are you happy?* Given the simplicity of the question, it was surprisingly difficult to answer (“Happiness?” “Isn’t that odd?”). We struggled to answer and, in reflection, questioned the intersections of happiness and work-life balance, belonging, productivity, well-being, and scholarly impact. The question, and our inability to answer, provided clarity about our sense of belonging at our institutions, prompting us to pose the final rhetorical question: *Am I in the right place?*

Our question: *Am I in the right place?* illuminates feelings of fit, satisfaction, and, ultimately, belonging at our institutions. The transition from a research-intensive graduate program to regional, comprehensive teaching institutions produced tension; it made us question how we could be productive members of the faculty and personally flourish in our current institutions. Morrison and colleagues (2011) investigated academic fit and found this was common for those graduating from nationally recognized, research-intensive Ph.D. programs. As graduates of such a program, we did not realize that our graduate education was a potential source of dissonance when we transitioned to teaching-intensive institutions (“I had colleagues around me telling me to slow down / …I didn't know how to slow down”). The process of generating poems allowed us to understand how we benefited from our graduate education and how such experiences negatively biased our perceptions and expectations of workplace norms. It was precisely those perceptions and expectations that made us, and others, question our belonging in our institutions (“So, you don't need a Ph.D. to do what you are doing”). In our new contexts, we developed personal connections with colleagues and rapport with students. We also recognized that the first-year faculty experience involved finding opportunities to support our institution and discover how we could

continue with our previous professional goals ("I feel supported all the time here / but…"). In some cases, these tasks were not achieved ("…[I] rarely feel like I am making a difference"). These questions ultimately led one author to take a job at a different institution, one that aligned better with her goals. Consequently, as Reybold (2005) confirms "faculty members rarely leave the academy because of a lack of competence. Instead, they reach the end of a disillusioning process that overwhelms their personal dream of being a faculty member" (p. 120).

Concluding Remarks

As illustrated through the poetic inquiry process described in this paper, our early career faculty experience was characterized by questioning. The rhetorical questions posed in our collaborative autoethnographic journal highlighted elements of the first-year experience that were not entirely understood in the moment. We lacked the time and space to truly understand the dissonance we were feeling. To answer the research question about the potential of collective poetic inquiry, we found that only by generating found poetry and collaboratively analyzing our poems were we able to understand our first-year experience more fully. Through the artistic process, we realized that our first year as assistant professors were preoccupied with managing tasks, balancing work, avoiding burnout, building relationships, and discovering how to belong in the new context. We found the essence of the early career faculty experience was characterized by overcoming conflict, navigating alienation, and reflecting on complicated feelings of transition.

Knowing the issues articulated in our poems impact incoming faculty, many institutions have formal orientation and mentoring programs aimed at supporting early career faculty. In our experiences, the faculty support programs we participated in promoted psychological safety, openness to new ideas, and community-building. While the support was generally beneficial, programs such as these encourage early career faculty to share conflicts with faculty who may hold an evaluative role in our career. In the context of this project, we found the trust and empathy provided to each other was essential for a deeper understanding of the early career experience. Thus, we advocate for an external, non-competitive, and supportive space to collaboratively investigate the questions that arise during the first years as faculty members.

The final poem "Maybe sharing the frustration is enough?" illustrates the potential of such a collaborative space to support others through moments of conflict. The two-voice poem shares individual experiences (i.e., left-aligned as one author and right-aligned as the other), illuminates the shared experience (central text) and the reflective power of rhetorical questions ("What am I doing here? / … Maybe sharing the frustration is enough?). Rhetorical questions, like these, are simply worded, yet they conjure feelings of uncertainty, ambiguity, and vulnerability. They do not desire an answer, but

the questions invite reflection and rumination. Without the expectation of a response, the reader must sit with them and imagine multiple implications and possibilities.

Figure 7

Maybe Sharing Frustration is Enough?

Maybe sharing the frustration is enough?

It was a really tough spring

I totally understand this feeling
I have spent more time crying in the past week than
I would like to admit

I am trying to step back to analyze my feelings
feelings of frustration

I did not speak up about my frustration
I had trouble sleeping last night
I was thinking about our committee meeting
Talking about belonging, I just don't belong here

It's as if you reached into my brain
wrote the words I've been thinking

What am I doing here?

I was asked to put together past syllabi for a course
I have taken… taught…. several courses on this topic
undergrads and grad students
I earned a dual Ph.D. to be able to do this

I realized I felt
anxious, stressed, frustrated

In the meeting
she stated that we did not have anyone that could
teach *that* course

In the meeting
I spoke up -- openly disagreed with my chair
even today, two weeks later

I'm still having anxiety-heart-flutter-pangs about what was said.

Two members of the committee argued that I could,
she just flat out said, "no, we did not have anyone qualified"

I said: I have to disagree with the last point
I am not comfortable with others telling me what I must cover
As a professional, I want the academic freedom
to make decisions about my classes

SILENCE

I feel this feeling of frustration with you.
How can I help?
Maybe sharing the frustration is enough?

Considering our research question about how rhetorical questions invite critical reflection, we found the real power of these rhetorical questions was that they served as

openings for exploration and catalysts for critical reflection. Rhetorical questions illuminated muddy moments that need to be investigated to understand the new contexts better. Grappling with these questions on our own was burdensome, yet when shared in a collaborative space, the conflict was normalized ("I feel this frustration with you"). Our questioning might have initially been ignored as moments of self-doubt or confusion if such collaboration had not been available. Therefore, it is essential that early career faculty work with trusted colleagues to investigate questions that arise.

The exploration of rhetorical questions posed in the early career experience has implications for early career faculty and those seeking to support them in the transition. Accordingly, we advocate for higher education institutions to continue internal mentorship programs as well as to promote opportunities for critical reflection with external colleagues. By working with self-selected, external colleagues to unpack specific contexts and individualized questions, we recognized the commonality across our shared experiences. This recognition ("Maybe sharing the frustration is enough?") minimized the weight of uncertainty brought about in our first year. Questions and questioning are more than just self-doubt; they are entry points into understanding. The questions that emerge in the experience can act as powerful tools to better understand deeply held beliefs, expectations, and norms for early career faculty.

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