

Revisiting the Need for Poetry Forums in Colleges of Engineering

Craig James Gunn

Department of Mechanical Engineering

Michigan State University

East Lansing, MI 48824

Email:gunn@egr.msu.edu

Abstract

17 years ago, a poetry contest was initiated in the College of Engineering at XXX. It was decided that there was a need to allow engineering students, especially mechanical engineering students, to think outside the box, visit written areas outside the technical, and to revisit writing that they had practiced or enjoyed in the past. The idea was to give everyone the chance to relaxingly put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard and let the creative juices flow. The idea was to allow engineers to branch out from the normal technical content and explore the avenues of writing that are available to them outside of engineering.

For almost eleven years, the production of students, faculty, staff, and alumni filled page after page, assembling almost 500 works of creativity. At that point, production began to wane and for two years the poetry now a forum atrophied, much like the writing skills of many engineers. Finally, the forum ceased to function. The idea is now to bring back the heyday of poetry writing and re-instill, especially in the undergraduate and graduate population, a desire to venture onto the page and produce poetry in whatever form it takes. It is with that we have started to look at how we might encourage the writing of poetry, show the importance of experimenting with other forms of writing, and eventually to bring back the production of poetry that we saw in previous years.

In order to give a complete view of how the forum emerged, the history of the forum and the rationale for even having the forum is detailed in the introduction. The new efforts to revive the previous positive efforts required us to realize that simply putting out signs saying, “Poetry Forum – Submit,” might have little or no effect upon the population. It was going to take an effort that, hopefully, would culminate in actual poetry production. It was decided that we would capture as much feedback from the students, faculty, and staff concerning their desire or lack thereof to participate in the forum. Initial surveys are being prepared to cover the three main groups (students, faculty, and staff) and find out if they are interested and willing. The surveys will be discussed. Questions on Survey Monkey are being prepared to gain insights into why individuals were willing or unwilling to write. Faculty are encouraged to talk to their students about the possibility of spending a little time on a different kind of writing task. These three methods are bolstered by randomly picking freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior classes and presenting a short incentive presentation to whet the appetite of the class. Comments will be made on the need to gain the interest of the faculty and students. Very preliminary results will be presented showing the interest of the students in participating and the faculty in providing their own voices to the forum.

The History of the Poetry Forum

In the beginning, we expected students to rebel against the writing of poetry, but we did not

expect the production that we actually received. With no pressure to produce, students were stepping forward and creating pages and pages of very well done text. Anecdotal comments will be included to show how they received the assignment, took it to heart, and came out of the experience with a greater attitude toward writing outside the technical box.

As was reported 17 years ago, we continue to see through ABET's requirements for accreditation the clear indication that written communication is of tantamount importance in the education of undergraduate engineers. No mention is made to remove communication as an important part of an engineer's education. The main concern is that engineers are able to produce good technical material that can be used by the technically literate and the uninitiated masses. As I have said to any number of students and classes, "At this institution you will not graduate as mechanical engineers, you will graduate as communicators of mechanical engineering!" It is critical that our students understand the importance of their communication skills. These are not soft skills; they are the skills of success and accomplishment. There is nothing soft about them. Therefore in order to give our students every chance to both practice and investigate the language that they use, a poetry forum was initiated. The prime motivation behind the forum was simply to let students write, to vent their emotions in some form of verse, and to try in a very short space to be creative in something other than technical text. The forum aimed "to show the creative talent of the engineering students, but it also served a needed purpose of providing a visible validation for their sometimes-secretive writing activities."

I wrote 17 years ago that *'Variety's the spice of life, that gives it its **flavor.**'* These lines in "The Task, II" by William Cowper (English poet 1731-1800) reflect an attitude that must be fostered in the minds of engineers. No man is an island, and no field of study can divorce itself from the activities, interests and positive reinforcement of divergent areas of instruction. Students who become embroiled in the quest for a degree in any of the engineering areas can quickly close the doors to many of the more liberal pursuits. The feeling exists that any time spent on "non-engineering" pursuits is not beneficial to the career. With that thought comes a quick comment. Why should any engineer waste time with writing poetry? This is a very good comment because an engineer's academic life is filled with a myriad number of technical tasks that consume a great deal of the waking day. So how can we justify an engineer taking time out of that grueling day to actually sit down and write poetry? Perhaps this is one of the easier answers to come by when thinking outside the box of engineering. We know that engineering involves precise knowledge in areas like heat transfer, fluids, controls, and vibrations. There is a constant need to make sure that the language used by the engineer expresses exactly what needs to be understood by the reader. Word choice and the positioning of words reminds one of what happens when a piece of poetry is created. Poetry then helps the engineer to practice the use of words and how they are placed to bring text to the reader.

We saw in the past that too many engineers go through their college or university careers unaware that many of their peers studying fluids, circuits, controls, composites, or calculus have vast experience in the liberal arts. These talents and interests lie hidden while the technical courses are taken and technical knowledge is gained. It is important to the rounded education of engineers that an effort is made to bring to light the liberal interests of engineers. Age-old

stereotypes that influence the way that engineers perceive themselves need to be investigated, modified, and in many cases destroyed.

When the science revolution took place in the 1700s, the movement to divorce the scientific world from the arts was loudly applauded by liberal studies activists. Science was trying to carve its place in the world and, therefore, had other issues to consume its time. Complaints over the past decades have reflected upon this separation of disciplines. We have been deluged with "right brain, left brain" concerns, with cries that "engineers cannot communicate", and with the whole smokescreen of what is perceived to be the "stereotypical engineer." We can decry these attitudes, but many are ingrained into the society in which we live and work. While the public's perception of engineers may require a vast reeducation, it is with the engineers that the first steps must be taken to change the incorrect vision.

The comments made here will not deal with the vast battle lines that involve the world outside of engineering. To cover that issue would take much greater space than can be allowed in this work. The area that will be investigated approaches the issue from the inside by targeting the engineering faculty, support staff, and students.

No visible change can take place in the attitudes of people if interest and a willingness to discuss are not present. In order for the attitudes of the world to change, engineers must first believe that there is no wall between the sciences and the humanities. As engineers grow in their realization that the humanities do hold an important place in their lives then the word will reach out to the masses of people outside the engineering disciplines. Interested parties in every engineering department should be functioning as catalysts to the thoughts of groups like the Liberal Education Division of The American Society of Engineering Education. They should be working to make every student, staff, and faculty member aware of the liberal education interests of everyone connected to engineering.

One finds a very interesting situation when one approaches the issue of the humanities and its connection to engineering. The stereotypical vision of the engineer stated above is rampant in both the engineering community and the world outside engineering. It is enlightening to note, though, that the stereotype is only a superficial belief among the vast majority of engineers. It appears to be necessary for many to foster this belief in order to keep the engineering area pure from liberal notions. The importance of the technical education is somehow enhanced by the fact that it is not connected to the arts and letters curriculum. When one sits down with engineers in a non-threatening environment where true feelings can be expressed, a different impression is expressed. Students begin to speak about the instruments that they play and the particular level of competence that they have achieved in the musical world. When discovered working on the computer, students will blush when they speak of the poetry that they write, the most recent play that has been penned, or the latest collection of short stories that have been produced. In many cases, this admission seems to be something that should be left hidden in a veil of secrecy. Students never seem ready to admit to a sharing of liberal ideas, needs, and wants. This desire to submerge these interests in areas other than engineering demonstrates the need to revitalize the education of future engineers.

All the above activities may be of interest to those who believe that elements of the humanities are a vital part of an engineer's education. The problem exists when we approach the typical student body and inform it that the humanities should be investigated, utilized, and made a part of an engineer's life. Here the necessity is to make a case for the unification of the technical and liberal sides to education. The intricacy of musical pieces, the knowledge that can be gained from working carefully through a text, or the meticulous effort that needs to be taken in painting a work of art are activities that complement the direction that engineers commonly follow in gaining their knowledge. Engineers are meticulous. They strive for clarity and conciseness, and their research requires exacting pursuit until every contingency is addressed. The creative mind presents these same requirements. As engineers delve into the world of liberal arts they will find the connections that unify the two areas of study. The catalyst that can begin this process is as close as the department in which they study. Conversation leads to discussion. Discussion can open wide the doors. Here we enter the world of poetry and its place in the College of Engineering at XXX.

The Poetry Production

In the first year of the poetry contest, approximately 50 students, faculty, and staff submitted almost 100 poetical works that covered engineering themes and the more liberal areas of love, friendship, and heartache. During a three-week period, the submissions flowed freely and the excitement grew in the college. Some awaited the announcement of winners, and some chose to await the end of the contest to see if engineers could really produce quality material. It did not take long for the results to show both the creativity and the depth of ability in the engineers. The following poem by Joe Kramer shows a fun loving ability to investigate the language and give it life.

Joe Kraemer

Piles of engineering paper
and pencils packed with gunpowder
lies that led me to believe that lines are straight
and incapable of hugging the curved surface of the earth

Those days when everything is vivid
And all you want to do is be sunshine
Those days you can really feel the world spinning
You start the centrifuge, your soul the supernatant
The fiber of your being is diluted and foiled
Your heart is put in an autoclave

Your head is full of steam
Shoulders stress and pressure
Feet heavy as an iron door

You walk planks constantly

Until the day you quit living in a palace made of boxes
And rediscovered an ancient secret

It's surprisingly comfortable to live curled inside the curves of a question mark.

Things start to happen.

Days when scales will fall from your eyes
Shatter gloriously on the floor
You will begin to float weightlessly
Exploring the emptiness inside your atoms
Filling void with photons

Just Another Jingle Haley Fisher

It is hot as Havana
And you need a break
You have a banana
So let's make a shake

Add two cubes of ice
And a splash of milk
Do the first step twice
It'll be smooth as silk

Turn on the blender
And ready your cup
You're in for some splendor
So hey, bottoms up!

The following poem shows the ability of the engineer/writer to create lengthy text in a precise manner.

RESOLVE Kwasi Adu-Berchie

NARRATOR:

I see her walking the streets

Her robe sweeping the ground
Cleaning yet clean
On the dusty paths she tread
Yet her feet remain radiant
I see her smiling

A smile which glows like the sun
Giving life to all around
Giving light in all its splendor
A light that pierces the thickest darkness
And drives away the black night
Darkness, yes all darkness but her own

SHE

My heart is torn
I live in two places at a time
And my heart rests in both places
In both places I get my satisfaction
In both places I find my peace
Without seeing one I heartbeat seem to stop
Without touching the other I lose my all
Because I loves them both
And both make me feel like a queen
Different, both are
Yet beautiful both remain
Why me?
Why should my love be split?
Why should my affection roam?
Isn't love meant to belong to one?
Shouldn't emotions be for a single?
I look into their eyes and my heart melts
Their words quench my thirst
Both, he and he
Both!!
Now my heart trembles
And in fear I live
I know I cannot have them both
But both, I want
Destiny, if you exist,
Could this be your handiwork?
Could this be your cruel intent?

NARRATOR

Out of nowhere she hears a voice say
Resolve

My dear resolve
For whether destiny or choice

Resolve you must

And resolve you can
It is up to you to choose both
Or to choose one
Or to choose none at all
For you can decide to go through the partial emptiness of one,
Than the pain of none,
Or yet still
The pain of none, than the guilt of both
Or the guilt of both
Than the emptiness of one
Resolve!!

NARRATOR

On the streets I see her again,
Those same dusty paths
With those same robes sweeping the streets
Suddenly sorrow engulfs me
And tears roll down my eyes
For her lovely clothes were drenched in mud
And her glowing smile had withered
For she had chosen the pain of none
Than the emptiness of one
Or the guilt of both
But the pain looked unbearable
And her tears uncontrollable

SHE

I long for my grace
My smile I want back
My light I am desperate for
For this darkness consumes the night
And my sorrow no one can fathom
My love, both I need
For this vacuum nothing else can fill
Now I stand in a haze
Should I live in the ecstasy of both?
Or drench myself in the island of pain?

NARRATOR

Then she hears the voice
The exact same voice say

Resolve
My dear resolve

For whether destiny or choice
Resolve you must
And resolve you can
It is up to you to choose both
Or to choose one
Or to choose none at all
For you can decide to go through the partial emptiness of one,
Than the pain of none,
Or yet still
The pain of none, than the guilt of both
Or the guilt of both
Than the emptiness of one
Resolve!!

NARRATOR

And again I see this beauty
Walking down the same dusty road
Her smile was fake
Her light un-bright
She looked happy
Yet incomplete
She looked joyful
But the joy was nonexistent

SHE

I have deceived both
To both I said I belonged
To each I said I loved
Not that it was false
For I indeed loved both
But both believe they are alone
And my love dwells solely for them
And with no other they compete
But both I want and desire
And only both, I know can satisfy
But the guilt is enormous
And the shame is great
They deserve to know more
They are worth more than my deception
They are more precious than my lies
Now I stand in a limbo
To have none or both

I cannot tell

NARRATOR

Then she hears the voice say again

Resolve

My dear resolve

For whether destiny or choice

Resolve you must

And resolve you can

It is up to you to choose both

Or to choose one

Or to choose none at all

For you can decide to go through the partial emptiness of one,

Than the pain of none,

Or yet still

The pain of none, than the guilt of both

Or the guilt of both

Than the emptiness of one

Resolve!!

NARRATOR

Again and again I see the queen

Walking down those same sandy paths

With her light dimly shining

Her face lit with joy

Genuine, yet incomplete

Smiling, yet mourning

SHE

I have decided to choose one

And leave the other

I swim in the love of one

But miss the affection of the other

I feel satisfied, yet empty

Satisfied because I have my love

Empty because I yearn for my love

A guilty feeling I do not have

Yet emptiness engulfs me

Which is better?

The guilt of having both

Or the emptiness of letting one go?

NARRATOR

The voice speaks to her again

Resolve

My dear resolve

For whether destiny or choice
Resolve you must
And resolve you can
It is up to you to choose both
Or to choose one
Or to choose none at all
For you can decide to go through the partial emptiness of one,
Than the pain of none,
Or yet still
The pain of none, than the guilt of both
Or the guilt of both
Than the emptiness of one
Resolve!!

NARRATOR

On her knees she goes
Her voice in a state of desperation
Her face riddled with confusion

SHE

I want to resolve
But hopeless I feel
And powerless I have become
I am in a state of dilemma
A stand in confusion
Don't you understand?
I have no idea what to do
For is there anything I can do?

NARRATOR

To the voice, she explains her limbo,
For the right thing she wants to do
But what is right she does not know
To follow her heart or her conscience
She cannot decide
The voice tells her finally
The best decision is the one you will look back and not regret
Even though it may cause some pain
The right decision is that point which the head and heart intersects
Even if they do not agree
The true path is the one your God will approve
And for which you are willingly accountable
.....
So you see
Resolve

My dear resolve
For whether destiny or choice
Resolve you must
And resolve you can
It is up to you to choose both
Or to choose one
Or to choose none at all
For you can decide to go through the partial emptiness of one,
Than the pain of none,
Or yet still
The pain of none, than the guilt of both
Or the guilt of both
Than the emptiness of one
Resolve!!

As the poetry forum unfolded over the years there was an interest to produce work in a multitude of languages. The wide variety of international students have been encouraged to create in their native tongues, as is shown below. The one issue that has been discussed is to have the engineer/writers create in their own language and then provide a translation (as close as they can) in English.

Tao Zeng

四季歌
—曾涛
春雨绵绵，水有情；
夏日炎炎，花似锦。
秋风爽爽，谷如金，
冬雪飘飘，梅独欣。

Another relaxed poet expressed emotions in words.

My Dream Anishpal Gill

The best parts of my day are where I dream
And drift off to another place.
This place is where all my wishes come true
A sunny and happy place.
As I dream these dreams and continue drifting

My path soon starts to fade.
The dreams consume; they block my sights
Storm clouds in my way.
My dreams turn sad; my goals turn bleak
Because of all its bounds

There has never been a requirement to produce work of any specific length so poems as concise as haikus with a structure of 5-7-5 syllables are popular with engineers who want to create in a shortened form. This helps to lend a positive air to poetry forums, giving writers a flexibility to write as much as they want to. The haikus below show that concise language.

Alper Can

Petals of flower
Onto rain pitter patters
Forms pool of water

9.2

Spring herself is here
She is a flower in bloom
Her lips soft as rose

The poem that follows reflects the versatility of poetry to move from rhyming and specific structures to free verse.

We also left the forms and shapes to the desires of the writers. In that way we were not demanding of the writer a particular style. In the following the writer takes over using free verse to convey ideas, emotions, and meanings.

Glad I met you anonymous

I am very scared and frustrated by some of the things I am facing now, but isn't everybody a little frustrated, by this path we go down?
It feels like only me sometimes, when I imagine becoming stone, or being cut alive by the blade of life, it is sometimes hard for me to not think I am alone
Because I never am, but I want to believe it is true, but everything has been okay since I've met you
I am very glad I met you though, and I don't regret a thing, they can't make me beg for their forgiveness, if they'd try I'd probably just scream
Hopefully I wouldn't even do that, to give them the satisfaction of hurting me, shoving words of arrogance in my mouth, telling me which way I should move about
No matter what, I tell myself, that no matter what, I won't broke in a realm of neither Heaven nor Hell
You are to kind, and from when I the moment I met you, I knew we would get along fine

But I just felt so terribly empty inside and you weren't afraid to give me a piece of your mind
I really do admire that about you, and through walls so thick, you had broken through
Without fear, you had given me all of this good cheer, so I celebrate you, and everything you
mean to me right in here (the heart)
And you helped save my heart from the darkest place, and, to you, I give so much thanks
I believe that the Creator had given me a reward, even though I do not deserve such wonderful
things; my life was spared from meeting the edge of the devil's razor-sharp sword
The Lord owns me, and he has set me free, it is amazing how your presence has just reminded
me of such things
My true Father waits for me to enter his kingdom when I die; his arms are where I want to take
shelter, and cry away until day breaks into night
I rejoice and praise his name, and thank him that I only have myself to blame
Because I never again want to blame anyone for my sorrows, especially if they don't deserve my
anger thrust upon their shoulders, because, right now, I am feeling boulder
No more cowardly lion, no more slimy snake, and, once more, I feel that I have you to thank
And the Father who works miraculous wonders into my life every day; my heart is content that
we are both on the same page
May we bring thanks and praise together forever to his Holy Name.

Thaw Stephanie Black

Robins bouncing means
gray dirty days are melting.
Joy drizzles in on us
in fits and starts.
We dust off our smiles
and timidly unzip our coats.
Slowly we remember the sun.
And then the really short forms appear as shown by the following piece that captures the ability
of the writer to express huge ideas in a few words.

War anonymous

The tears come later.

Rightly Left-Brained Iember Hemben

“What do you wanna be when you grow up?”
“An actress!” her sister boldly exclaims
“A firefighter!” her brother shouts to the adults.
“An engineer...” is the first word that comes to her brain.
A mature response from such a simple candidate,
The looks of puzzlement make her sweat.
As one kid talks about flying planes,

*Proceedings of the 2018 ASEE North Central Section Conference
Copyright © 2019, American Society for Engineering Education*

She thinks about how she'd rather build the jets.
Making her way up the academic ladder,
She takes a liking to math, though she's not very good.
"Engineering is your goal?" A math teacher asked.
"Have you looked at something else? Maybe you should."
She's no longer affected by anyone's doubt;
Those looks of puzzlement have become her drive.
A different type of thinker, she works harder than most,
Slowly but surely headed toward her prize.
The further she looks into her major
The more she feels she's made the right choice.
Curiosity, creativity, invention, and challenge,
And working teams where she can use her voice.
Foreign name, dark skin, and lacking a Y chromosome,
Her thinking isn't all that differs from the majority of her peers.
Awkward black girl in a field that is 80% male and 70% white,
She refuses to let her dreams be affected by her fears.
"College of engineering?" acquaintances will inquire
"You seem more like College of Arts and Letters."
"I get that a lot; I do love writing!" she replies,
"But engineering is just so much better!"

Waltz for an Autumn Day Arie Lyles

today, greeting the biting breath of late October
I sit on an empty bench
today the park is completely desolate
not a single note escapes a crow's beak
no woman walks her dog, composing the endless list
of things she'd wish she'd done with her life -
like swimming in the ocean, hang gliding, learning
to cook Chinese, and saying yes to her ex-boyfriend's proposal
no young couple in love's embrace - the man secretly
wishing to go home and watch the game alone
no children climbing the ancient oak that serves
as a safe zone during neighborhood games of tag
today even the sun cloaks itself, the cover
of a cloud-ridden sky numbs the earth below
today my only company is the wind

picking up, it begins to waltz with the fallen
leaves to an orchestra I can hear,
tapping my foot to the upbeat tempo
the trees bent over in the wind remind me
of my father coming home from a long day's work

walking through the door
slow and silent, making his way to pour
the first of many burly drinks the kind
he would say put hair on your chest
we had become a distorted image
through the bottom of his glass
blurs of flesh and hair to brush by on his way

Over the years the numbers of individuals writing for the forum increased and then leveled out at approximately 150 entrants with an added excitement that showed that students were not only interested in submitting work but experiencing what others had written. It was especially interesting to see students reading those works that were deemed winners in the contest when they were displayed in the lobby of the Engineering Building. There was a quiet reserve in the lobby turned reading room. Some students were even heard to ask other students “to quiet down so they could truly enjoy the reading.” Poetry had become something that was not the property of those liberal education majors on the other side of campus. Poetry was a part of engineering as much as math and science. The depth of understanding and ability to present ideas improved.

As the years unfolded, the numbers of writers began to decline and eventually interest on the part of students, faculty, and staff completely disappeared. Now was the time to let the Phoenix rise from the ashes and allow the engineers to produce text that allowed a freedom that does not exist with their technical writing.

Poetry allows engineers to produce text that is outside the normal technical production. These engineers can let their creative juices flow within both technical and non-technical areas, experimenting with language and structure. Poetry allows the engineer an avenue for expression in a very technical existence.

Now has come the time to take what has already been created and continue to build upon the poetry of the past. We have started with a simple set of surveys to find out what we can about the current attitudes toward writing poetry. We are interested in seeing what we can glean about our population.

STUDENT SURVEY

Do you write poetry? Y/N

Would you be interested in submitting poetry to a college poetry forum? Y/N

Do you think poetry might help your technical text? Y/N

Will you submit work to the new poetry forum? Y/N

FACULTY/STAFF SURVEY

Do you see the writing of poetry having a value in engineering writing? Y/N

Would you be willing to advertise a poetry forum for entries in the college of engineering? Y/N

Would you submit any work to the poetry forum? Y/N

We want faculty, staff, and students to realize that there are a multitude of reasons for encouraging people to write. These reasons hopefully will spur them to think about contributing to the effort.

The reasons that we are presenting include:

- A chance to be creative in an area not normally accessed by engineers
- A place where one can express those feelings that may have lay dormant for a time
- An ability to express ideas in a very short span
- A place to just have fun
- An opportunity to see what one can do with one's own language
- An opportunity to actually mold the language that one uses to express one's inner most thoughts
- A safe haven where the construction of language doesn't bring rebuke from others
- A chance to compare what one says in the technical world and how the manipulation of the text can be seen in other avenues.

We also plan to visit the larger classes in the College of Engineering to spread the word of the Poetry Forum. That effort is in the planning stages.

Conclusions

Writing, speaking, thinking, and listening in areas other than engineering are activities that can suddenly open up a wide range of text production in areas that perhaps have not been comfortably accessed by our engineering students, faculty, and staff. It requires little effort to conduct a poetry contest or forum to allow engineers to create their poetry. They can be easily sponsored and perpetuated in engineering departments. Poetry contests provide a means to open up many avenues for communication. Students made aware of the need to expose their liberal talents and interests to their fellow engineers will bring to engineering a whole new area of creativity, creativity that is at the heart of all true engineers. Faculty and staff members should utilize any means possible to draw connections between engineering and the liberal arts. At the simplest level it is an awareness issue. As more individuals are made aware of the mutual interests of their colleagues, the separation of the liberal arts and the sciences will shrink. With this shrinkage will come a greater awareness on the part of the rest of the world and with it a firmer commitment to see the whole person and not the stereotype. Since a focus on ABET is always a concern, the poetry forum provides students with another means to cultivate their own voices through language. Although poetry is not considered technical, it does provide practice in word choice and the elements of grammatical correctness. As the work continues this focus will be more closely explained.

CRAIG JAMES GUNN is the Director of the Communication Program in the Department of Mechanical Engineering. Author of numerous books relating to success in college and papers on communication within engineering departments, he also spends ample time helping students complete their texts for publication and degrees. With degrees in English, he holds a unique place with which to provide support to engineering students as an in-house guide to communication.