



How Innovation Is More Poetry Than Science

Practical lessons from 35 years of writing poetry to help individuals and teams deliver more innovative products, processes, and services.

By Daniel W. Rasmus

In a conversation with Phil McKinney, former HP Chief Innovation Officer and author of [*Beyond the Obvious: Killer Questions That Spark Game-Changing Innovation*](#), we discussed innovation theory.

McKinney said that much of the literature about innovation comes from theorists, not practitioners. I responded that some of us assert practical innovation insights informed by very different experiences.

Rather than learning about innovation through an Executive Innovation MBA program, or receiving an MBA in Innovation Management, I sat through hours of workshop classes learning to write poetry. The experience of reading, writing, reviewing and publishing poetry has informed all of the innovations that I have had the pleasure to co-create, from the Surface

Mount Assembly Reasoning Tool (SMART) at Western Digital to the Center for Information Work at Microsoft.

American state and national legislators and leaders relentlessly harp on the need for stronger STEM education (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math), but this mindset does not recognize the need for well-rounded, culturally connected researchers and readers who extend themselves beyond simple categories of knowledge in order to create innovation. Poetry does not find valor under the auspices of STEM. Our future is as much threatened by the lack of imaginative connection-making as it is from a dearth of engineers or mathematicians.

Here are practical lessons from 35 years of writing poetry that can help individuals and teams deliver more innovative products, processes and services.

Details matter

Poetry is not about words. Poetry is about the right words. Innovation isn't about ideas. Innovation is about the right ideas. Innovators need to carefully select the features, functions or experiences that comprise a new product, process or service. As poets need a large vocabulary to precisely convey their meaning, innovators need a deep vocabulary of science and practice, and engineering and management to construct their innovative wares.

Design is critical

Selecting the right word or feature, however, isn't enough. Words and features must also be arranged correctly. Modern poetry finds synergy with the visual arts. The way words sit on a page convey rhythm and breaks, breathing and emphasis, more so than the now often discarded punctuation. In innovation, design plays as much a role as function. How easy it is to get a device to do something often speaks more to innovation than the function itself. The iPod rose to dominance not because it played MP3 files, but because it did so through a unique design of hardware, software and services that changed people's relationship to their music.

Understand the market

Poets are not above marketing. Though writing an epic poem remains technically and intellectually possible, even in this age of micro-markets and one-to-one marketing, the chances of finding a publisher for such a poem is exceedingly unlikely. Short poems do best, and those that observe the world with a certain twist do better than most rants or rages. And in the world of

poetry slams, well-practiced articulations of rhyme-packed observations fuel an entire subculture.

My market remains the journal, not the slam, so I practice writing rather than the internalization of phrases that transform into seemingly, but-not-so-much, spontaneous verbal improvisation. Innovators, as much as they want to create new products for new markets, need to understand markets that exist. The poetry slam evolved more from cultural and political expression deficits and the competitive nature of many Americans than from any need to return poetry to its spoken language roots.

Structure informs

Many imagine poets as free-form thinkers, sprinkling words along a page until they run out of inspiration. Poets, however, are more architects and tinkerers than verbal Jackson Pollocks. For most of history, poets were expected to work within the very structured constraints of the sonnet, the sestina, the villanelle or haiku (to name a few), each an innovation in itself with elaborate rhyme schemes and rhythm rules.

Truth be told, most poets, even the most sprawling and unstructured, have at one time or another tackled a sonnet at minimum, and if they were associated with a creative writing program, probably other forms of structured verse, as well.

This familiarity and experience with structure informs divergence. A poet who understands the history of poetry has direct experience with the craftsmanship required to create structured verse. He or she is better equipped to introduce innovations in language than those with fewer tools. The same is true of innovation. Ideas are cheap. Innovation requires skill and knowledge of structure and first principles in order to produce consumable value. People who want to innovate should be students of the domains being called upon to facilitate the birth of their creations.

Cut ruthlessly

I have written very long poems, but many of my long poems became short poems. It wasn't just because today's market mostly calls for shorter poems. My poems become shorter over time because I relentlessly hone them. Poets often overwrite as much as people over-decorate at Christmas. If a box of tinsel is good, then two boxes are better. The more ornaments, the more festive. But I believe the essence of art and the essence of innovative design comes through best with purposeful sparseness. A clever turn of phrase can

get lost among many not-so-clever turns of phrase, the same as an elegant feature can be lost among many not-so-elegant features.

Seek collaborative criticism religiously

My first experience in a poetry workshop came when I visited UC Santa Cruz as a high school junior and was asked not only to sit in, but to participate. At the time, I didn't know that professor J.B. Hall would become my mentor, but he encouraged me to say what I thought of the poem that a student had just read. Being a brash 16-year-old I quickly went for the mixed metaphors and words that seemed out of place. For a couple of years, that student and I continued to spar as peers after I entered Santa Cruz's creative writing program.

I have always found that writing, even poetry writing, held too closely to the shadows is not as good as poetry exposed to the light of day. Several of my published poems have been modified by careful dialogue between myself and journal editors who sensed a word out of place, or an unnecessary clause. T.S. Eliot's now iconic [*The Wasteland*](#) would not be the poem we know today without Ezra Pound's insightful edits.

Unlike poetry, innovation doesn't have a private, hidden, personal journal version that can exist without criticism, a version written only for oneself. A tightly held innovation fails to adapt because it becomes too precious, too rigid or too fragile to manipulate. A tightly held innovation becomes a personal poem and nothing else. Innovations should, like verse in a poetry workshop, be delivered into the world early so that worthy ideas may defend themselves and evolve, choking off superfluous ones now freed to find their own niche, or to die.



Actively explore the unknown

Good poetry makes unique observations about the world. Poetry focuses experience so people unfamiliar with an experience may, for a moment, share a gasp or sigh, lust or longing, repulsion or reverence. Similarly, innovation needs to create products, processes or services that offer unique value. Both activities require continuous learning and the ability to synthesize the unknown into something emotionally or physically consumable. If poets or innovators limit themselves to what they know, they will be capable only of reconfiguring the familiar, but not creating something new.

Observe your world with all your senses

Conjuring sensory-driven emotional responses through descriptive text might be a clinical definition of poetry. One can only achieve the translation of emotion into words if one practices emotions and equates them to a wide range of sensory experiences. Although the mind is a wonderful contraption of memory, it is an even better creator of distortion. Distortion can inform poetry and innovation by making new connections to seemingly disparate information. None of that is possible without a wide range of sensory input. Innovators need to touch, smell and feel, to listen and to watch, to incorporate all facets of what they observe lest they find their bag a widget short of an insight just when needed. (Which is another reason to collaborate: Innovators never know what they need, and they may be surprised by who brings what to the party.)

Take copious, non-linear notes

For purists, observation comes not strictly from mental acuity, but from practice. Even while writing this article I had a moment of insight that was lost in a fleeting mind fart. Innovators and poets alike should take copious notes. They also need to reflect on those notes, to connect concepts through conduits, build infrastructure to support ideas. Notes hold mental sand and brick and steel, and without them, people leave destiny and wealth and recognition to the fragility of human consciousness. If you think something is important, write it down.



What you end up with may not be what you intended

When I start writing a poem, I do so with some sense of where I intend to end up. Minutes or weeks or years later, the poem once so filled with the passion for a particular vector weaves itself along an entirely different path. I have seen great designs do the same. As knowledge is gained, experiences collected and feedback gathered, the original inspired thought morphs into something more robust, more resilient, more saleable. It can also morph into a Christmas tree with too many ornaments. These rules are not meant to be taken singularly or out of context, but to be applied simultaneously and continuously or what you end up with becomes not only something other than what was intended, but an anathema to aesthetics, or an unremarkable kludge that reflects political promises it cannot fulfill.

Innovations also exist in time, subject to the flow of change that may make them relevant or obsolete depending on which day from which they are viewed. While the commercial incandescent light remains a towering innovation for its time, its power-hungry nature was first challenged by less ravenous compact fluorescent lights, and then quickly by power nibbling LEDs. Social, economic, political, technological and environmental change challenges the usefulness and the relevance of an innovation, as much as it does the taste for a particular poet or form of poetry.

Endings make all the difference

I was asked more than once in a poetry workshop if a person who writes poetry without publishing is a poet. In the context of innovation, my answer must clearly be no. Poets affect people's perceptions of the world, and to do that, they must extend their world so that others can interact with it. It isn't enough to end a poem well. The poem must find a home to be really meaningful. Innovators deliver a value of purpose. A product, process or service can only be called innovative when it emerges into the world, leaving a wake that changes the world, however subtly, forever.

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Daniel W Rasmus, the author of *Listening to the Future*, is a strategist who helps clients put their future in context. Rasmus uses scenarios to analyze trends in society, technology, economics, the environment, and politics in order to discover implications used to develop and refine products, services and experiences. His latest book, *Management by Design* (Wiley, 2010) proposes an innovative new methodology for the design workplace experiences. Rasmus's poetry can be found at danielwasmuspoetry.wordpress.com.