

The availability of a poetry tutor prompts inexperienced writers to explore deeply emotional themes

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SUMMARY

Poetry is recognized as an art form that offers a means of self-expression and provides therapeutic benefits. However, writers with limited experience struggle to craft poems and not realize these opportunities. In response, a free, web-based poetry tutor utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) was developed (Loving Words) to improve poetry writing skills. Our hypothesis was that participants in group 1 unaware of and not given access to a poetry assistant will focus on casual topics such as nature, while those in group 2 who are aware of and given access to Loving Words will venture to explore poems that have controversial themes such as death and pain and experience therapeutic benefits from their writing. Loving Words was developed using available software and a knowledge base of 50+ published poems from the lead author. Two groups of 10 participants wrote unprompted poems without assistance, but group 2 used Loving Words to improve their writing. Group 1 wrote poems centered around light-hearted themes such as friendship, pets, and vacation, while participants in group 2 wrote poems exploring controversial topics such as abuse, anxiety, and divorce. At the end, a five-question survey was given to group 2. The survey showed positive experiences using Loving Words and improved poetry skills and increased confidence. Four participants mentioned a therapeutic benefit. Our data suggest participants with prior knowledge and access to Loving Words explored more controversial themes and experienced therapeutic benefits. A readily available AI poetry assistant will enable everyone to truly explore the depths of poetry.

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is a part of creative writing where expressive words and phrases are used to convey emotions beyond the limits of everyday language (1). There is a growing body of evidence showing the therapeutic benefits of poetry, and these are increasingly recognized across various vulnerable groups (2-7). Poetry plays an important role in bibliotherapy, the practice of using literature to promote mental health well-being through reading and writing. Studies have suggested poetry serves as a powerful tool for senior citizens, sparking creativity and enhancing cognitive processes (2). Reading poetry aloud has been shown to invigorate memory and inspire seniors, including those with dementia, by connecting them to their life experiences and validating their feelings (3).

Previous studies have shown that interactive arts, including poetry, are also effective in reducing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, especially in school children who have experienced trauma (4,5). Poetry facilitates emotional processing and self-realization, allowing individuals to analyze and cope with their experiences, enhancing their mental well-being. For prisoners, poetry offers a form of emotional and psychological escape, aiding in maintaining sanity, integrity, and a sense of humanity (6). It provides a medium to express feelings humorously or seriously, aiding in coping with incarceration and fostering self-realization. Poetry has also been found to improve psychiatric symptoms in adolescents (7). A previous study has shown that by incorporating poetry into educational psychology and psychotherapy, it promotes personality shaping and psychological healing, effectively addressing mental health issues common among college students and younger populations (7).

Writing poetry can have significant benefits, yet many find the process of crafting poems daunting and difficult (8-10). The intricate art of poetry writing remains elusive to many, and its therapeutic benefits are missed. Finding a qualified poetry teacher can be a formidable task, compounded by high costs and limited accessibility: few poetry tutors, geographic restrictions, technology barriers. Because of these limitations, the public tends not to write poetry or utilize it for therapy even though studies have shown the positive benefits to mental health (9-11). Thus, a need exists to offer people free access to poetry tutoring to help those interested in writing and possible therapy.

It is generally known that people with no poetry experience tend to write about, but are not limited to, nature, love, self-identity, childhood memories, dreams, or everyday life (12). We believe if a poetry assistant is present, topics that elicit stronger emotions may be explored. To examine these issues, we created an artificial intelligence (AI) poetry assistant (Loving Words) using an existing AI platform and enhancing the knowledge base with over 50 published poems from Leonardo Chung. We hypothesized that having access to Loving Words would encourage participants to explore topics that involve strong emotions, thereby providing them with a powerful medium to fully express their feelings and potentially find therapeutic benefits. With improved expression, Loving Words may be used through electronic media and enable bibliotherapy through technology, or digital bibliotherapy.

By facilitating and encouraging the art of writing poetry, one will explore themes that may elicit sadness, anger, or agony, but through this self-expression, poetry will help those in need find mental health healing. Loving Words will ensure accessibility, reduce costs, and continue to serve as an effective poetry tutor.

RESULTS

Twenty participants aged 18 to 55 years with little poetry experience and from diverse backgrounds completed the study. The participants were randomly divided into two equal groups. Group 1 had no knowledge of Loving Words and was told the study would end after they wrote their poems. Group 2 was aware of Loving Words and that they would interact with it to improve their poetry skills. Both groups were asked to write a poem on any topic.

In group 1, poems centered around friendship [1 poem], pets [1], nature [2], a grandmother [1], a vacation [1], love [2], and children [2]. No participants in group 1 wrote about “deeply emotional” or “controversial” topics that may elicit anxiety or stress. All 10 participants in group 2, however, tackled topics that elicited strong emotions: difficulties with motherhood [1], anxiety and stress [2], divorce [1], abusive relationships [2], grief surrounding death [2], the meaning of life [1], and religion [1].

After completion of the study, only group 2 was given a survey because participants in this group interacted with Loving Words. The average time engaged with Loving Words was 50 minutes. Group 2 participants exhibited higher confidence in their poetry writing skills after interactions with Loving Words (**Figure 1**). The first question of the survey asked each participant to share their overall experience with the AI tutor on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being excellent and 1 being terrible. All participants reported 5s, indicating an overall positive experience. The second question asked each writer to assess how well they could write poetry prior to using Loving Words, with 5 being very well and 1 being not well at all. The average score reported was 2.7 ± 1.16 . This suggests the lack of experience in writing poetry in group 2. The third question asked each writer to assess if their poetry writing skills improved after using the AI tutor, with 5 being absolutely and 1 being not at all. The average score was 4.5 ± 0.53 which is consistent with the results from question 1. The fourth question specifically asked if the AI tutor itself was the reason for the improvement in writing poetry with 5 being extremely helpful and 1 being not helpful. The average score for question four was 4.9 ± 0.32 . The last question asked each

writer what they liked most about the AI poetry tutor. All 10 participants wrote personal positive remarks such as, “I like how the AI helped me think of poetry in a deeper way” and “I enjoyed how AI would give suggestions on how to improve the tone and flow of my writing all while keeping my original message.”

All participants in group 2 acknowledged that all the edited poems using Loving Words showed marked improvement. Four participants in group 2, in particular, mentioned therapeutic benefits (i.e., crying in frustration or letting out anger) after completing the sessions that dealt with the following topics: recent death of a lifelong pet, anger related to her divorce, forgiveness after abusive relationship, and frustrations of being a single mother.

A screenshot of an interaction between Loving Words and the lead author shows that when the user entered, “Alone and scared,” Loving Words suggested changing the line to heighten a sense of vulnerability by editing it to “Alone, my heart a whisper in the vast silence” (**Figure 2**). Similarly, for the revised poem, Loving Words commented, “The transition from fear and isolation to a yearning for warmth and familiarity deepens impact of the poem” (**Figure 3**). The feedback is interactive and very in depth.

DISCUSSION

Often regarded as bibliotherapy, it is well known that reading and writing can be used to help treat psychiatric disorders (9,10,13). Moreover, the relationship between poetry and psychotherapy has been widely studied as well as documentation of neuronal responses in the brain that are distinct from those seen in music and singing (14,15). Poetry offers a more holistic therapeutic option to positively influence public health issues with significant potential in enhancing quality of life, even for those with severe conditions like dementia (3,16). The universal nature of poetry’s impact on the cognitive process, memory, and emotional expression makes it a versatile and potent tool in mental health care across different age groups and life situations (6,7,17).

Reading and writing poetry can have significant benefits, yet many find the process of crafting poems daunting. This challenge is similar to asking someone to paint without any prior instructions, often leading to frustration and stress rather than artistic expression. Similarly, the intricate art of poetry writing remains elusive to many. Although it is a form of free expression, poetry remains grounded in distinct structures and methods that make it captivating. The art of writing poetry is widely taught and embraced, as seen in numerous educational programs, workshops, and tutoring opportunities available for aspiring poets. However, finding a qualified poetry teacher can be a formidable task, compounded by high costs and limited accessibility.

It is generally accepted that the lay public with little to no poetry experience may experiment with writing poems based on common themes such as joy, nature, nostalgia, relationships, and everyday life and observations. Most do not explore deeper, more controversial topics such as suicide, racism, politics, poverty, or trauma due to their lack of writing experience, and unfortunately, do not have the opportunity to explore the therapeutic benefits of expressive writing. For instance, Louise Glück, a renowned poet and Nobel Laureate in Literature, often wrote about themes related to personal family struggles, consequences of romantic relationships,

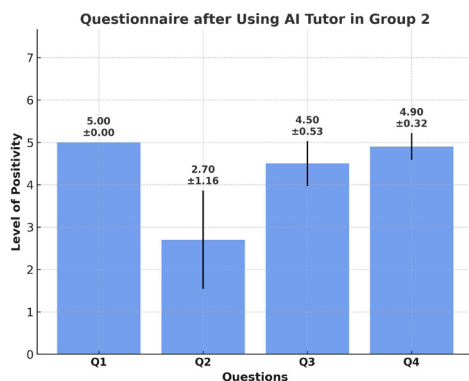


Figure 1: Group 2 survey responses after completing poetry revisions with AI tutor. Group 2 participants took a five question survey that assessed [Q1] overall experience, [Q2] prior poetry skill, [Q3] perceived improvement after using the tutor, and [Q4] the tutor’s helpfulness. Question 5 was free response and not shown in this figure. All answers rated on a 5-point scale (5 = most positive, 1 = least positive). Mean value \pm standard deviation for each question response is labeled at the top of each bar.

Loving Words

 Jia**Welcome back. I'm here to help you improve your poetry. Let's begin ...***User: Help me improve this poem and give suggestions:**I walk to a place where I am a stranger
Alone and scared.
I wish for a familiar face or helping hand.*

AI: Your poem beautifully captures a feeling of vulnerability and the desire for connection. To enhance its emotional impact and depth, it might be beneficial to introduce more vivid imagery, specific details, and possibly explore the contradiction or transformation within the feeling of being a stranger. Here are some suggestions for each line, taking inspiration from the style commonly found in the poetry within the knowledge base:

1. **"Enhancing Imagery and Emotions":**

Original Line: "I walk to a place where I am a stranger"
Suggestion: "I tread lightly into realms uncharted and strange"

This suggested line aims to enhance the imagery by depicting a sense of cautious progress into unfamiliar territory, adding a bit of mystery and depth to the feeling of entering a new place.

2. **"Deepening the Sense of Vulnerability":**

Original Line: "Alone and scared."
Suggestion: "Alone, my heart a whisper in the vast silence."

This amendment deepens the sense of vulnerability by not only mentioning being alone and scared but also illustrating the quietness and isolation felt internally.

3. **"Introducing the Desire for Connection":**

Original Line: "I wish for a familiar face or helping hand."
Suggestion: "I long for a glimpse of recognition, for the warmth of a hand in mine."

Expanding on the original desire for a familiar presence or assistance, this suggested line amplifies the emotional longing for connection and human touch, making it more vivid and emotionally resonant.

Figure 2: Interaction with Loving Words. After the initial stanza is entered by the user, Loving Words gives suggestions to enhance emotion and sense of vulnerability. Original poem entered by lead author (yellow box) with comments from Loving Words (green box).

and overall hopelessness. Over time, she centered her writing more about inner torment and mental suffering (18). We believe if a tutor, person or machine, is available, it may embolden writers to explore emotionally challenging, maybe even painful, topics.

In response to this, we harnessed AI and the use of large language models from Leonardo Chung's previously published poems to create a free, online poetry-writing assistant. Current technologies, like the widely known ChatGPT, sometimes demand a fee and, at the time of this research, predominantly generate rhyming poems. Recognizing this, we developed Loving Words – an online AI poetry tutor designed to offer guidance in a variety of poetic styles, aligning with modern tastes and making the art of writing and reading poetry more feasible, enjoyable, and cost effective.

Digital bibliotherapy has been shown to be an effective means to address mental health (19). In our study, all ten participants in group 2 freely wrote about topics that involved strong emotions. We believed they wanted to pursue meaningful topics because Loving Words would help guide their poetry and bring "legitimacy" to their work. Four of the participants found therapeutic benefits in coping with their topics. They were able to release emotions of sorrow, anger, forgiveness, and frustrations. One participant cried in anger about her divorce as she wrote her poem. Another participant grieved the death of her pet dog of 15 years. A third participant forgave her ex-spouse for abusing her, and the fourth participant released her frustrations about the difficulties of being a single mother. These were expressed in their post-session comments. The therapeutic outcomes are consistent with the focus of bibliotherapy.

Group 1 did not have a survey because novice writers spend time writing about themes that are not usually associated with mental health healing. Bibliotherapy involves writing about working through an internal struggle or pain. As previously mentioned, novice writers generally do not explore these topics. However, we have shown that the knowledge of having a tutor will encourage novice writers to take a chance and write about a stressful topic. This now opens the possibility of healing. Even if a poetry prompt was given, we doubt participants in group 1 would explore emotional themes, as their hesitancy is rooted in the lack of confidence in writing poetry rather than a lack of writing ideas.

We also explored the use of Loving Words in a different language. A feasibility test using the Korean language was completed. A rudimentary poem was written in Korean, and Loving Words was able to translate the poem and give suggestions in both English and Korean. This capability may allow the international community to utilize Loving Words. We are interested in learning if other languages can be used.

Weaknesses in the project include a low number of participants. Thus, the survey results, although suggestive of trends, are not statistically significant. Also, although the use of 50+ published poems from Chung's personal writings exceeds expectations for a high school student, more poems are needed to enhance the knowledge base. With permission, poems may be used from other published poets to create a more robust platform. The current study addressed several needs. Firstly, Loving Words was as effective as a real poetry tutor in helping participants explore deeper emotional themes. They felt comfortable knowing someone (or something) would help their writing skills. This support enabled group 2 to

Putting it all together, the revised poem with the suggestions could read:

"I tread lightly into realms uncharted and strange,
Alone, my heart a whisper in the vast silence.
I long for a glimpse of recognition, for the warmth of a hand in mine."

Feel free to mix and match these suggestions, or use them as a springboard to further develop your poem. The aim is to enhance the emotional and sensory depth of your piece, making the reader feel the strangeness of the new place and the deep human need for connection.

User: Ok, here is a newer version:

I tread softly
in a place uncharted
unfamiliar and new.
Alone, my heartbeat breaks
the deafening silence.
I hope for a chance to feel
comfort from warmth from those
I remember from my past.

How is this?

AI: Your revised version demonstrates a notable improvement in evoking a sense of place, emotion, and longing for connection. The use of sensory details and the deepening of the emotional landscape create a more immersive and poignant experience for the reader. Here are a few observations and suggestions to further refine your poem:

1. **"Imagery and Sensory Detail":**

Your use of "tread softly" and "uncharted" effectively sets the stage for an exploration filled with cautious optimism and vulnerability. The imagery of "my heartbeat breaks the deafening silence" is particularly powerful, highlighting the protagonist's intense feeling of isolation and the stark contrast between the internal and external worlds.

2. **"Emotional Depth":**

The transition from fear and isolation to a yearning for warmth and familiarity deepens the emotional impact of the poem. It transitions smoothly from a visceral experience of solitude to a profound longing for comfort and connection.

3. **"Suggested Adjustments for Fluidity and Clarity":**

While the poem is strong, a slight rearrangement and enhancement could provide additional clarity and emphasis on the desired warmth and connection. Consider the following adjustments:

"I tread softly,
into realms uncharted and new.
Unfamiliar surrounds envelop me,

Figure 3: Further Interactions with Loving Words. Loving Words assesses poem entered by user and makes objective comments to improve imagery, emotional depth, and clarity of the original poem. Original poem entered by lead author (yellow box) with comments from Loving Words (green box).

explore sensitive topics. Secondly, Loving Words addressed issues related to the accessibility of tutors. By being free and online, anyone can use it. Lastly, by addressing the two prior needs, the study demonstrates the feasibility of digital bibliotherapy. Once again, this study suggests mental healing through Loving Words is possible.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Loving Words web application empowers users to create and analyze poems by leveraging the power of Generative AI. The software was developed using the ChatGPT4o platform. Users post their poems to the AI application through an input text field. The poems were then processed using OpenAI's language models to create unique vector representations. These vectors were compared to a database of 50+ pre-embedded poems (copyrighted by Leonardo Chung), enabling the application to identify the most stylistically similar works. By analyzing these comparisons, users gained valuable insights into their own writing, explored new creative avenues, and received suggestions for improvement. The application was built with Node.js on the backend. Node.js was used to create the server and connect it to the OpenAI's assistance API for Retrieval Augmented Generation (RAG)-based querying. The React framework was used on the frontend, where both end users and administrators can interact. The framework integrated a specialized vector database for efficient search and retrieval. Because the frontend and the backend were connected, poems that were entered on the frontend were sent for RAG-based analysis, and the results were then displayed back to the user. Users can also view and clear their history of

analyzed poems. The application was deployed to the cloud using fly.io. The tutor was accessible via both mobile and web interfaces, offering flexibility to participants.

To enhance the AI's capabilities and build the knowledge base, 50+ previously published poems from Leonardo Chung were uploaded, citing the literary magazines where they first appeared. Because of ongoing debate in the literary community regarding copyright violation issues as it relates to training AI software using previously published works without permission, we only used Chung's published poems (20). Additionally, the AI was programmed with clear guidelines to ensure its effectiveness and appropriateness: 1) it avoids the use of profanity, 2) it offers constructive suggestions based on its knowledge base, and 3) it does not autonomously generate poems. This structured approach made the AI a valuable and responsible tutor, adhering to the principles of suitable content and interactive education. Prior to its public deployment, Loving Words underwent thorough internal testing. For security purposes, access was controlled through a username and password system.

Participants

This study involved 20 volunteer participants aged 18 and above, of any gender, racial, or ethnic background. Recruitment was conducted through personal invitations and word-of-mouth, targeting individuals in school. A diverse group of participants with little to no poetry experience was selected. Each participant was randomly assigned to group 1 or 2. To ensure privacy, no personal identifiers were collected from participants. Throughout the experiment, participants had the liberty to withdraw from the study at any point, no

questions asked. Additionally, for those who required it, screen filters were made available to protect against potential eye strain or discomfort from prolonged computer screen exposure. Participants were randomly assigned to either group.

Poetry writing process

The procedure began with each participant writing a free verse poem of any length. There were no restrictions on the topic, and participants were encouraged to write about anything they wished. Poems were labeled as “deeply emotional” or “controversial” by analyzing the topics and themes of the poems. For example, a poem on the topic of nature and a theme about a sunny day was labeled as not “deeply emotional.” The categorization was modeled after previously published poetry prompts (12). There were no poems where categorization was ambiguous. This concluded group 1’s involvement in the study.

For group 2, their poems were then inputted into the Loving Words web interface. Participants had the autonomy to ask Loving Words for critiques and suggestions on enhancing their poems. All participants interacted with Loving Words for feedback. The nature of the instructions to Loving Words varied, depending on each participant’s preference, ranging from specific guidance to more general feedback requests.

Loving Words was given explicit instructions not to generate entire poems. However, to help a participant, the AI tutor did give suggestions to improve a stanza. This is similar to a real-life tutor teaching their tutee by giving examples. It is certainly possible that a participant copied each line and claimed it as their own; however, as long as participants felt their work had improved, the exact content of the revised poem was less critical. Moreover, both the original and revised versions were shared with the entire group. Because participants were informed of this sharing beforehand, we hoped it would discourage copying and pasting directly from Loving Words.

Participants in group 2 were given up to one hour to interact with Loving Words and refine their poetry. Upon completion, the original and revised poems were written and collected confidentially for analysis. To maintain confidentiality and data security, all poems entered into Loving Words were permanently deleted after each session. Loving Words was programmed not to learn from any previous sessions.

Data analysis

For group 2, after all 10 participants finished their assignments, with the authors’ consent, both the initial and revised poems were shared anonymously among the participants. Because poetry is subjective, participants provided a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response to whether they believed the revised poems showed improvement over the originals. This was a separate question that was asked of all the participants and not part of the questionnaire. The written poems were then permanently discarded. These written evaluations were recorded confidentially and shared anonymously at the study’s conclusion. All 10 poems edited using Loving Words were unanimously voted by participants as improvements over the original versions.

Group 2 then filled out a 5-question survey: 1) How would you rate your overall experience with the AI poetry tutor? (5 Excellent, 1 Terrible); 2) Prior to using the poetry tutor, how

well did you write poetry (5 Very well, 1 Not at all); 3) After using the poetry tutor, do you think you can write better poetry (5 Absolutely, 1 Not at all); 4) Do you feel the tutor helped you write better poetry (5 Extremely helpful, 1 Not helpful at all); 5) What did you like most about the AI poetry tutor? (free response). The mean and standard deviation were calculated for each question.

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