

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Case Study I: Critical Reading and Student Engagement with Poetry

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### **Voices and choices**

This chapter explores the significance of engaging students in the process of critical reading by providing them with the opportunity of choosing the poems they read and discuss in class. Focusing on my experience of teaching poetry as part of an A Level English course in Malta, this chapter underscores the need to capitalize on students' contributions.

The teaching of poetry in post-sixteen education is meant to help students develop the skill to read a variety of poems in a critical manner. Developing such a skill is sometimes a tortuous process that can lead teachers to adopt a pedagogy that emphasizes the modelling of a style of close reading, which arguably pushes students into the role of bystanders, thus sacrificing personal engagement. The teacher is at the centre of the arena and the students are meant to be learning by observing the master reader as he or she unravels the poem. The teacher might occasionally ask a question but 'When the whole class and the teacher tackle a poem together, what tends to happen is more like an oral comprehension test than a genuine discussion' (D'Arcy, 1978: 148). The students feel they have to provide the right answers to a set of questions that are not genuinely seeking new information but are there to test the kind of understanding the teacher is looking for. This means that the lesson ends up being dominated by teacher

talk. McRae (1991) argues that 'Teacher input, to be assimilated and reproduced, invites static almost mechanical learning. Interaction, learner involvement, inductive learning, all contribute to making the process dynamic' (p. 8). The prevalence of such teacher input is a by-product of the act of teachers positioning themselves as 'gatekeepers' through whose 'offices' (Tweddle et al., 1997: 50) students read the poem. Hughes's (2009) description of her experiences at school probably resonates with those of many others, most certainly my own as a student of poetry:

Our teachers encouraged us to find the specific meaning in the text, placed there by the author, whether intentionally or not. There was one meaning that could be uncovered and we were trained to do so. Often we didn't need to search for meaning at all because the 'correct' meaning was served up to us by the teacher; all we needed to do was listen and regurgitate the answers in our essays. (pp. 21–22)

Such pedagogy gives primacy to the teacher's role in the critical reading of poetry and risks underestimating the significance of student engagement, with the consequence that poetry ends up being perceived as something that can only be read within the confines of the classroom and only under the supervision of the teacher.

In light of the above, I find it hard to identify with Blocksidge (2000) when he asserts that 'Seminar conditions can be the norm from day one of the A-Level course and, in studying poetry, pupils can quickly grow used to the practice of questioning the poem, questioning each other and questioning me' (p. 105). My experience of the A Level poetry classroom is also at odds with the idea that students in post-sixteen education are used to a style of teaching 'based on a relatively intimate, interactive discussion group' (Amigoni and Sanders, 2003: 75). However, I do believe that this kind of pedagogy is highly desirable. The opportunity to interact and work in a group leads to growth (Bensey, 1991), develops metacognition and metadiscoursal skills (Hardman and Beverton, 1993, 1995) and facilitates understanding (Yazedjian and Kolkhorst, 2007). Students working in groups achieve more than individuals working alone and the process of achieving as a part of a group transfers to individual testing situations (Gabbert et al., 1986). In fact, it is also reported that group discussion has an impact on student's understanding of texts they are required to read and interpret as part of a test (Fall et al., 2000). When group processes are of high quality, all the students in a heterogeneous group of varying levels of achievement are bound to benefit (Wing-yi Cheng et al., 2008). Such a pedagogy is crucial because it values the students' voice as much as that of the teacher. Probst (2004) claims that 'If a class begins to work well, the students may accept the teacher as a participant in the same process of responding and thinking, able to contribute as another learner' (pp. 91–92). When the teacher seeks to create a democratic classroom environment in

which students' opinions matter as much as those of the teacher, this will facilitate student engagement. A valid poetry teaching strategy is when the teacher 'helps them discuss their thoughts with other students, communicate ideas effectively and work productively with others' (Chambers and Gregory, 2006: 136). This kind of pedagogy values students' contributions and seeks to devise means by which they may flourish.

One kind of contribution that is sometimes entirely ignored consists of students' preferences as to what is read in class, which some teachers might see as their prerogative. It is true that even if as teachers we allow students to be involved in the choice of texts 'We cannot remove our authority. We are older and more experienced readers. But we can even the playing field, at least somewhat, by encountering poetry for the first time along with our students' (Connolly and Smith, 2003: 239). This is in line with the idea that 'students are more likely to be engaged if they have some choice about what they will study and the texts they will read' (Beach et al., 2006: 7–8). By being empowered to choose what they would like to read in class, students will be encouraged to stop seeing themselves as passive recipients of knowledge. Ultimately, the purpose of any poetry lesson should not just be that of helping students to pass their examination; what is more important is that it should inspire them to continue reading poetry for pleasure even after they finish their course. As Lambirth (2007) points out, 'If young people see poetry attached to hard graft and analysis, they will see no reason to incorporate it into their leisure time' (p. 14). Critical reading skills are of crucial significance but the development of such skills should not come at the expense of student engagement with poetry. That is why the pedagogy employed in the teaching of poetry at A Level should be sufficiently varied and cultivate ways of boosting students' voices and choices.

## Context

I teach English at a post-sixteen college in Malta. My students enrol on a two-year course leading to an A Level English examination in which their knowledge and skills in relation to poetry are assessed in two separate components – a question on a set text and a question on an unseen poem. In the first year of their course, students attend a weekly one-hour lecture on the set text, which in the current syllabus (MATSEC, 2013) consists of an anthology of Wilfred Owen's war poems. Teachers are expected to cover a selection of twenty poems from this text in the first year. They also attend a weekly one-hour literary criticism seminar in which they are trained in how to critically read a selection of prose extracts and poems selected by the teacher. The emphasis of these seminars is primarily on poetry given that at the end of the first year, students sit for a department-administered test in which they are expected to write an essay on an unseen

poem. In this test they also write an essay on the set text. In the second year, students do not attend any lectures on the set text but they continue attending weekly literary criticism seminars.

## Pedagogic imitation

As already indicated, the emphasis of the poetry components in the A Level English syllabus in Malta is primarily on students' ability to read in a critical manner. The literary criticism seminars that students attend every single week over their two-year course are meant to be the chief means by which their critical reading skills are developed. In these seminars, students are expected to acquire a set of skills that they can use in tackling an unseen poem but which are also transferable to their handling of all the other literature components in the examination. According to Nicholls (2002), during a seminar, students should be given the opportunity to develop critical thinking and the ability to engage in argumentation; one of the teacher's roles during such a lesson is that of listening (p. 89). However, the main problem I experienced when I started teaching literary criticism was students' reluctance to actually take an active role in discussing the texts that I had chosen for them to read. They seemed to be quite content to sit and listen to me analysing the poem. Whenever I asked questions, very few students would hazard to offer an opinion and usually it was always the most eager students who initiated an unprompted response to the text. Despite the fact that they possessed a level of critical ability to independently come up with a reading of the poem, they seemed to rely on me to tell them how it should be read. It seemed as if the students' confidence in their own critical skills had never been adequately cultivated.

This situation led me to reflect on why students seemed so disinclined to participate in the kind of lively class discussions that I was after. I recalled my own experiences as an A Level student at the same school and remembered how one of the difficulties I had during literary criticism seminars was that of having to quickly make sense of an unfamiliar text that the teacher seemed to know inside out. My class used to be given a poem at the beginning of the lesson and a few minutes in which to read it and develop an interpretation. The teacher used to ask us questions and when we failed to come up with a suitable response or any response at all, he would start explaining the poem to us line-by-line, occasionally stopping to ask another question before giving up and moving on. As a student I felt I was being quizzed about something the teacher was very familiar with. I felt there was only one right answer and that I was expected to guess which one it was. This sometimes led to feelings of frustration and it made me see poetry as a cryptic genre. A poem had a hidden meaning and only the experienced reader sitting in front of the class had access to it. When I became a teacher I wanted to avoid spoiling my students' enjoyment of

poetry by engaging in this kind of pedagogy; however, after the first few weeks I found myself imitating my own teachers.

Reflecting on my own experiences as a student, I realized that perhaps one of the main causes for the problem was the sense of inequality that existed in the seminar room. By choosing poems that I was familiar with, I was unwittingly acting as a gatekeeper to meaning and thus pushing students to depend on me for their understanding of the poem. Ironically, what were meant to be unseen poems were some of the poems I had read over and over again before taking them to class. The solution I thought of was that of trying to put myself in the students' shoes and read poems with them through a fresh perspective. This would entail asking students to choose the poems themselves, something I was not sure had been done before at my school.

## Practices and attitudes

When I interviewed fifteen students and eight of my fellow poetry teachers about who selects the poems they read during the literary criticism seminars, they all declared that it is the teacher who is responsible for this. Half of my colleagues indicated that they had never asked students to choose any poems and another two claimed that they had either done it once or else that 'it hardly ever happens'. Two other teachers mentioned that they do encourage students to bring poems to class but both of them affirmed that first they vet the poems in terms of efficacy as teaching and exam-preparation resources. One of the teachers who had never asked students to choose poetry to read in class claimed that this 'would be a good idea, something which might work... I think they would be able to benefit from bringing their own poems'. According to him, in teaching literary criticism 'there is a clash between trying to encourage students to love the subject while at the same time, being the component which students find hardest in the examination, work towards building their skills'. For him and some other colleagues, the main challenge is the time needed to cover all that is expected by the syllabus.

Nine students declared that the fact that it is their teachers who choose the poems to be read in the seminars is 'a good thing', a few of them indicating that the teacher 'knows best'. Nonetheless, fourteen students suggested that they should have a say in the choice of poems, primarily because 'a lot more people would be interested in the lesson'. Being asked to look for poems to read in class would, for one particular student, be an opportunity to 'find the kind of poetry that I enjoy most'. For another student it would serve as 'a chance to express your own taste'. The very act of 'bringing it in class... actually shows that it means something to them and they're appreciating it'. Expressing the sentiments of most of her peers, one student explained that 'we would probably enjoy poetry more if

we're given a chance of choosing poems'. The positive attitude of both my colleagues and students provided me with the reassurance to experiment with a different format for the poetry reading seminars.

## Student-led reading seminars

When I invited a class of students to compile a small selection of poems to read in class, they initially found it strange because none of them had ever been asked to adopt such a proactive role. They had always associated text selection with the syllabus or with their teachers. I asked the students to form groups and to collaborate in finding published poems that interested them and which they wanted to share and discuss with their peers. Each month we devoted one of the literary criticism lessons to poems the students had selected. Over the course of a number of lessons, each group took the lead to present two of its chosen poems to the class and manage small group discussions based on them. Despite still being familiar with some of the poems that the students had chosen, I sought to minimize my interventions as much as possible during these discussions so that the students' contributions could actually take centre stage. I asked questions whenever I genuinely wanted to learn something but was very cautious about how I offered my opinion since I did not want to undermine the fundamental purpose of these seminars. I never censored anything the students wanted to discuss and they seemed to take the responsibility given to them seriously by avoiding poems that were intentionally offensive. Most students opted for strictly canonical poems that they found in poetry anthologies at home or at the library. However, some students trawled the Internet looking for contemporary poetry dealing with issues they considered relevant to their lives and interests. The fact that their peers were leading the seminar allowed the rest of the class to take a more active stance. The group that had chosen the poems were still privileged in actually having read (and researched) the texts in question, however, the other students did not feel in awe of them and hence were unafraid of contributing their own readings of each poem, especially when these conflicted with those of the students running the seminar.

The main advantages of these student-led seminars were those of heightening students' engagement and helping to boost their confidence as critical readers of poetry. As one particular student put it, 'Bringing in our own poems helped me see poetry as belonging to us all. It made me enjoy analysing poetry even though I still have to do it for the exam.' Ultimately, giving students the right to select some of the poems to be read in class proved to be beneficial even for the seminars I chose to run; most students gradually started to enjoy class discussions of poetry and were no longer reluctant to take part in them.

## Conclusion

The belief that poetry is a difficult genre that requires the teacher to demonstrate how to analyse a poem so that students may be able to do the same in the examination might be one of the reasons for which poetry reading seminars consist of a high incidence of teacher talk (Xerri, 2013). By sharing the onus for the selection of poems with my students, I succeeded in not only curbing my own gatekeeping role but also in enhancing student engagement. It facilitated the creation of a more egalitarian classroom environment in which all those attending the seminar could actively engage in the critical reading of poetry. By being entitled to select the poems they wanted to share and discuss with their peers in class, students felt that their choices and opinions were being valued and this coaxed them into taking a more central role. My students were no longer just my audience but had finally become fellow readers of poetry who did not mind stepping onto the stage.