

Voices of experience: *Reflections*

'It's poetry, not drama!': The value of performing poetry

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Abstract

Language learners can benefit from the capacity for performance that is shared by poetry and drama. In this article, it is argued that by harnessing poetry's potential for performance, young people can develop their comprehension of poems, bolster their engagement with language, and discover a means of expressing their voices.



Poetry as performance

My realisation that poetry has a potential for performance was formed during my poetry lessons in secondary school. Midway through my secondary education, my class was assigned a non-Maltese teacher for our English lessons. Due to her accent and the Bosnian War raging at the time, we assumed she was an émigré from the Balkans. Unlike my previous English teachers, who mostly focused on telling us what poems meant, she encouraged us to learn how to recite poetry by heart and to pay attention to a poem's language and musicality. The contrast between her approach to poetry and that adopted by my other English teachers made me realise that the genre I had always associated with riddles and dense meanings was actually capable of being read and enjoyed in other ways, even through performance.

When I later followed a teacher education course at the University of Malta, one of my tutors strongly objected to the practice of asking students to recite poetry by heart. In her opinion, this once-common practice had no place in the twenty-first century classroom. I found this odd because my parents and relatives had always spoken fondly about being encouraged to memorise poetry when they were children. Thanks to my émigré teacher, I could understand why they felt this way.

For this reason, I cannot help but agree with the poet Brad Leithauser (2013), who argues that verse memorisation "provides us with knowledge of a qualitatively and physiologically different variety: you take the poem inside you, into your brain chemistry if not your blood, and you know it at a deeper, bodily level than if you simply read it off a screen".

Pennac (2010) shares similar sentiments when he describes the joys of teaching his students to engage in recitation: "In making my students memorize so many texts ... I was precipitating them, keen as they were, into the great flood of language, which rises up through the centuries to crash against our doors and surge through our houses" (p. 127). Despite all the reasons my tutor listed in support of her objections, I felt glad that I had experienced different approaches to poetry in my secondary schooling. It committed me to the idea of providing my own students with a variety of ways of experiencing a poem and of capitalising on approaches that maximised their engagement with poetry, including recitation.

My reading of the research literature in my graduate studies made me aware of how recitation as "a phenomenon that for so many years had formed a regular component of mass experience was demoted to the status of an optional pursuit" (Robson, 2012, p. 9). Research also indicated that educators' opposition to the practice of memorising and reciting poetry was driven by the notion that "it did not help students to analyse a poem and did not help them in exams" (Pullinger, 2012, p. 392).

This association of poetry with the analytical exercise typical of examinations is especially telling in light of Opie and Opie's (2001) seminal research on how verse as a form of language play amongst children originally published in 1951 helps to perpetuate the oral tradition. Thanks to initiatives like Poetry by Heart (England) and Poetry Out Loud (USA), the memorization and recitation of poetry are gradually becoming popular again.

Recitation is one example of how poems can be performed in front of an audience. It forms part of spoken word poetry, which is a catchall term that describes different kinds of recited poetry. These include slam poetry, in which poets perform their work and are judged by an audience, and performance poetry, which refers to poetry that is composed for public performance (Hirsch, 2014). The changing fortunes of recitation as an approach to poetry in the classroom has made me reflect on why teachers teach poetry in the way they do and how their attitudes and beliefs in relation to the genre might influence their practices.

For instance, the conception that poetry is a difficult genre leads to the practice of analysing a poem line-by-line in search of a hidden meaning; poetry thus remains bound to the printed page rather than performed (Xerri, 2013). The renewed popularity of recitation has also made me explore how the performance of poetry can help

enhance students' engagement with the poems they read and write, and with the language they use in order to do so. For example, when students are encouraged to perform a poem they have written in front of their classmates they are provided with an audience for their writing and allowed to see that poetic language finds its best manifestation in the spoken word.

Value in performance

In my research on poetry education in different countries around the world, I have had the opportunity of interviewing teachers, students, teacher educators, and poets. My interviewees have shared different views on the subject, at times conflicting ones. One of the comments that has remained in my mind was a teacher replying to a question on the value of teaching students how to perform poetry in the English classroom. In his opinion, the performance of poetry has no place in a lesson because "poetry is meant to be read silently. It's poetry, not drama!" This comment indicates how deep-seated certain misconceptions about poetry actually are, and how they influence teachers' and students' approach to poetry in the classroom.

Such misconceptions stop teachers and students from seeing poetry as a multimodal genre that can be performed verbally and physically. They hinder the use of such dramatic strategies as choral reading, readers' theatre, and mime. Just like the use of drama in education, the performance of poetry enables young people to immerse themselves in the topics they study at school, explore certain societal issues, give voice to their emotions and thoughts, and reap benefits that go beyond development in language and other school disciplines.

Besides the fact that this teacher's comment seems to negate the oral origins of poetry, what it also fails to acknowledge is that the performance of poetry is nowadays considered an important means of engaging young people with the genre and its language. In fact, "performing a poem is one of the most enjoyable ways of finding out how it tastes, how it works, how it hangs together, how rhythm, word music, the patterning of language and sound all combine to express feelings and meanings" (Barrs & Styles, 2013, p. 193). According to Certo (2013), "poetry matters, for it is a form of performance that can potentially exhilarate children and develop their confidence, all the while having their literal and metaphorical voices being heard" (p. 115).

The act of performing poetry "has the potential not only to celebrate form and meaning, but also to instantiate a kind of knowledge whose educational value should

be given equal status with the analytical understanding of poems that currently drives the examination system” (Pullinger & Whitley, 2013, p. 172). Poetry’s potential for performance encourages students to transcend the close reading of printed poems, which is commonly the only way in which they are asked to engage with poetry.

Given some young people’s reluctance to read poetry because of the belief that it is a difficult genre, performance can help to boost their understanding of the poems they engage with in class. In her review of the research literature, Ferguson (2014) found that

compared with other activities, dramatic activities can be more effective for exploring poetry and can result in higher comprehension. Dramatizing poetry helps students think deeply about poetic themes and content and helps to unlock the meaning of poems in a number of ways. For instance, in hearing poems read aloud, students are better able to understand the meaning of poems. Also, to perform a poem, a student must use critical thinking and comprehension skills such as activating prior knowledge, questioning, visualizing, inferencing, summarizing and synthesizing to explore both the literal and the unsaid within a poem (p. 1).

By facilitating their understanding, the performance of poetry enriches young people’s approach to the poems they read in class and invites them to read poetry in their own time.

As an active approach to texts, the performance of poetry helps to develop young people’s engagement with language. The spoken word poet Chelley McLear expressed this conviction when I interviewed her (see Xerri, 2017b). Working with students in Northern Ireland, McLear claims that performing poetry has value because “if a young person finds a way into language through something that is very contemporary, very relevant and talks about their own experience, then through that they can get excited about language”. Her views are in line with Burdan’s (2004) suggestion that “it is important for students to recognize that poetry lives both on the page and in the ear, to see and hear the play of language” (p. 27). Enabling young people to perform poetry in the English classroom provides them with an effective means of engaging with language.

In addition, the performance of poetry can be a powerful way of expressing one’s identity. My interviews with the spoken word poets Luka Lesson and Candy Royalle confirmed the idea that performing poetry is an important avenue of self-expression (see Xerri, 2016, 2017a). Both poets work with young people

in Australia and they have a lot of experience in doing workshops for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and non-English communities.

Royalle states: “I can’t make them brilliant writers and performers out of my workshops, but I can certainly give them the tools to go and do it later. Essentially, giving them confidence in their ability to express themselves, their right to express themselves.” Similarly, Lesson believes that “if young people are taught to be poets or to express themselves freely and perform their work, even if they don’t become poets later on in life, poetry does help human beings become more whole”. Royalle’s and Lesson’s views underscore the notion that performing poetry can help young people to tell their stories and cultivate their voices (Williams, 2015).

Rectifying the misconception that poems should only be approached as texts to be read in silence allows teachers to provide students with the opportunity of engaging with poetry via dramatic activities. For example, students can produce background noises to accompany a classmate’s performance of a poem, or else small groups of students create tableaux in representation of something mentioned in a recited poem (Ferguson, 2014). Such dramatic activities can help to develop young people’s understanding of a genre that uses language in highly creative ways. In the process, they might find it easier to overcome their sense of alienation from poetry, and feel motivated to derive pleasure from reading and writing it.

By being shown how to harness poetry’s potential for performance, young people are much more likely to see poems as dynamic texts and use the words that they themselves and other poets have composed to give voice to their innermost thoughts, desires, joys and fears. That is perhaps one of the most valuable things that they can be taught about exploiting the language they are learning.

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