

## TEACHERS AS READERS AND WRITERS OF POETRY: A WORKSHOP

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### Introduction

In order to cultivate creativity among young people, it is imperative to identify how teachers can achieve this effectively. Samuel Hope maintains that “If we want to develop creative potential in schools, we must want the necessary structures and means for its development as much as we want the results. A number of major adjustments are required” (39). One of the most fundamental adjustments that needs to be made is for teachers to position themselves as creative practitioners. This is because the cultivation of students’ creativity is to some extent dependent on teachers’ own efforts to engage in creative thinking and teaching: “creative teachers are such, precisely because they have made a conscious effort to be creative—they have, in other words, *decided* to be creative”

(Pugliese 15). Positioning oneself as a creative practitioner is no mean feat, and teachers require plenty of support to do so effectively. Poetry workshops that merge reading and writing have the potential to provide such support. They develop teachers' creativity by targeting the relevant knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes that they require in order to position themselves as creative practitioners.

### Reading Poetry

The journey toward becoming a creative practitioner must necessarily start by adopting the guise of an enthusiastic reader. Teachers who want to write poetry cannot avoid being passionate about reading it. Besides equipping them with a thorough knowledge of poetry, the act of identifying themselves as readers of poetry is also beneficial for their students. A number of studies highlight the importance of teachers positioning themselves as readers as a means of encouraging students to engage in extensive reading. According to Day and Bamford, "Keeping in mind that they are role models may change teachers' perceptions of the classroom and their role as teachers" (*Extensive Reading* 136). Teachers who position themselves as readers engage in classroom practices that enable them to "guide students and participate with them as members of a reading community" (47). Such practices boost students' motivation to engage in extensive reading and allow them to see reading as a pleasurable activity because of their perception of teachers as role models. For Day and Bamford, "Effective extensive reading teachers are themselves readers, teaching *by example* the attitudes and behaviors of a reader" ("Top Ten Principles" 140). They are teachers who are willing to "talk with students about their reading lives" (Commeyras et al. 164) and "consider it important to inspire a love of reading by acting as readers who teach.

Teachers need to embrace the idea that they themselves play a crucial part in helping students to become enthusiastic readers. According to Hedgcock and Ferris, "An obvious but often neglected way to do this is to model the behaviors of an enthusiastic reader" (227). For the past few years, the United Kingdom Literacy Association has sought to address the problem of low Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) results amongst children in England by means of a project aimed at exploring the reading habits of primary school teachers. This project also aims to provide teachers with the necessary support so that they can build communities of readers in their classrooms. The National Council of Teachers of English in the United States is involved in a similar project. The problem of reluctant young readers is compounded by the fact that in some cases teachers themselves are not keen on reading. A UK study by Cremin et al. found that teachers' knowledge of literature suitable for children and young adults was scant. The problem might be even more exigent in the case of poetry reading. The children's poet John Rice points out,

I don't think they do read it as much as we suppose they do because sometimes if I mention a poet's name to a teacher they don't know who that poet is and if I mention certain poems or certain anthologies I realize that it's a very restricted canon of work that teachers have read. (qtd. in Xerri, "Poetry on the Subway" 114)

The significance of teachers positioning themselves as readers as a means of encouraging young people is highlighted by the results of a study that aimed to develop forty-three teachers' stance as readers who teach (Cremin). This study shows that when teachers position themselves as readers they stand a better chance of positively influencing students' attitudes toward a particular genre, enabling them to read it

for pleasure. Teachers' enthusiasm for poetry plays a crucial role in boosting students' engagement, but this is difficult to achieve if teachers refrain from reading poetry. A lack of poetry reading on the part of teachers is one of the main obstacles toward them becoming creative practitioners. Hence, a poetry workshop for teachers cannot focus exclusively on writing activities but must use reading as a stepping-stone to writing.

### **Writing Poetry**

In order for poetry writing to flourish in the English classroom, teachers need to be in the vanguard of creative practice. However, this can only happen if they are provided with the means to critically reflect on their beliefs and practices and to position themselves as writers of poetry. Poetry writing activities in a workshop setting should serve the needs of both preservice and in-service teachers.

The value of poetry writing activities for pre-service teachers is substantial since they have the potential to equip them with the necessary creative disposition before embarking on their career. In fact, in order for trainee teachers to become creative practitioners "They need a secure pedagogical understanding and strong subject knowledge, supported by a passionate belief in the potential of creative teaching to engage and inspire hearts and minds" (Grainger et al. 251–252). According to Stafford, "Valuable though it is for student teachers to be given exciting ideas for the classroom, true creativity will only be achieved when they are empowered to think for themselves and generate their own innovations" (42). An example of this might consist of trainees taking the risk to adopt the guise of creative writers (Dymoke). Fitzgerald et al. affirm that "By participating in a creative writing experience, teachers not only open up new perspectives for their

student-learners, but also for themselves" (61). Encouraging prospective teachers to engage in such creative activities might help them to discover their own latent creativity and thus assume the stance of teachers who are willing to teach English in a creative fashion.

Poetry writing is also essential for in-service teachers. However, one of the main obstacles faced by anyone seeking to motivate teachers to position themselves as creative practitioners is a possible lack of confidence on their part with respect to poetry writing. Some of the reasons for this might have to do with their beliefs and attitudes in relation to poetry and poetry pedagogy. Xerri ("Colluding"), for example, shows how teachers' beliefs affect their classroom practices and influence the way students approach poetry, most often undermining the enjoyment of a poem in class. Moreover, the belief that poetry writing requires a talent that one is either born with or not is another obstacle to its prevalence in the English classroom (Xerri, "Poetry Writing"). The children's poet Michael Rosen explains that when it comes to poetry in the classroom some teachers feel "nervous" or "inadequate" due to their childhood experiences: "a lot of poetry teaching leaves people with a sense of a series of mild humiliations. There was a poem, there was a teacher and they felt they didn't know enough; the teacher knew more" (qtd. in Xerri, "Poetry is a Tremendous Ally" 115). Some teachers' sense of alienation from poetry and their ingrained beliefs about how it should be approached in a lesson act as a stumbling block in the effort to engage as many students as possible with poetry writing. Hence, a poetry workshop needs to help teachers overcome these obstacles by providing them with the opportunity to discover their own ability to write poetry.

## Merging Reading and Writing

One workshop activity that has the potential to merge reading and writing for teachers who are novices at the craft of poetry writing is that harnessing the potential of a poem that speaks directly about their profession. The close reading of a poem about teaching acts as a trigger for the writing of a poem about the same theme. Poems like Billy Collins's "Introduction to Poetry" and Howard Nemerov's "To David, About His Education" serve such a purpose. This article discusses how the villanelle "Subject to Change" by the Midwestern poet Marilyn L. Taylor can be used with teachers who might have very little or no experience of poetry writing.

In this activity the choice of poem is crucial as it needs to help novice poetry writers to relate to the subject matter and bank on their life experiences when engaged in the act of writing. In Taylor's poem, the speaker is a teacher reflecting on her students, focusing in particular on their youth and beauty. Anyone who has worked as a teacher can relate to the idea that when one teaches young people, their youth is blatantly noticeable, especially since you do not get to see them age so much if you teach them briefly (i.e., for a year or so). For example, I teach students aged between sixteen and eighteen, and every year I get to teach new classes of young people of the same age. I sometimes need to remind myself that whilst my students remain the same age year in year out, I am growing older every year. In a situation such as a mine, it is easy for teachers to delude themselves that they are not aging just because their students seem to be perpetually young. What the speaker in Taylor's poem does is to explore this idea and remind herself that the young people she teaches are subject to change too. Their beauty and youth are not inviolable.

## SUBJECT TO CHANGE

by Marilyn L. Taylor

*A reflection on my students*

They are so beautiful, and so very young  
they seem almost to glitter with perfection,  
these creatures that I briefly move among.

I never get to stay with them for long,  
but even so, I view them with affection:  
they are so beautiful, and so very young.

Poised or clumsy, placid or high-strung,  
they're expert in the art of introspection,  
these creatures that I briefly move among—

And if their words don't quite trip off the tongue  
consistently, with just the right inflection,  
they remain beautiful. And very young.

Still, I have to tell myself it's wrong  
to think of them as anything but fiction,  
these creatures that I briefly move among—

Because, like me, they're traveling headlong  
in that familiar, vertical direction  
that coarsens *beautiful*, blackmails *young*—  
the two delusions we all move among. (257)

The participants start by reading the poem and formulating their interpretation on the basis of a variety of poetic aspects, such as theme, tone, diction, imagery, and versification. After they have come up with their personal interpretation, they discuss this in groups of four. Besides encouraging

them to engage in critical reading, the workshop facilitator encourages the participants to interrogate the poem in relation to their own experiences. Linking the poem with their professional experiences and point of view is essential as this helps to make the poem relevant to who they are as individuals. It also enables them to see poetry as a valid means of expression of their own life experiences.

After the small-group discussion, the facilitator conducts a whole-group discussion on the poem aimed at identifying its main issues and the possible purpose behind each stanza. This discussion serves to put forward as many different readings as possible and highlight the evidence for such readings. These different readings are recorded on the board and then the participants are invited to think about how the poem could be saddled with other readings if changes are made to its linguistic and figurative features. An analysis of these features follows.

Going through the poem stanza by stanza, the facilitator encourages the participants to reflect on Taylor's choices in writing the poem. For example, the participants think about the significance of the words "beautiful" and "young," and their repetition throughout the poem. They consider other words that could replace these two qualities and what the implications of such changes would be. For every new word that they take into consideration, the participants are asked to evaluate its effect. This leads them to think carefully about the linguistic choices made when writing a poem. Special attention is given to the conventions governing a villanelle.

Typical of a shared writing activity (Xerri, "Shared Writing"), the facilitator acts as a scribe at the board and invites the whole group to suggest how the first tercet could be rewritten. They start by replacing the adjectives "beautiful" and "young," move on to choosing another verb instead of "glitter" and



another noun for “perfection,” and end by substituting the noun “creatures.” In this stage of the activity, different individuals will come up with different suggestions. Hence the facilitator needs to engage the participants in a discussion as to which choices are most effective. This enables the participants to negotiate poetic language among themselves.

Once the first tercet has been rewritten and there is consensus as to how it should read, the participants work in pairs in order to rewrite the rest of the poem. They are given complete freedom as to which diction and figurative devices to replace but are asked not to change the number of stanzas and lines in the poem and to respect other villanelle conventions. In rewriting the poem, the participants are encouraged to bank on their knowledge of language to create an effect and on their professional experiences to give the poem a different kind of perspective.

Once each pair of participants has finished the rewriting, they exchange their villanelle with that of another pair and provide constructive feedback. The facilitator guides the feedback process by asking the participants to think of the poetic aspects used to evaluate Taylor’s poem (i.e., theme, tone, diction, imagery, and versification), as well as the relevance and originality of the new poem’s perspective.

In the last stage of the activity, the participants work individually on a draft of their own original poem, which could either be a villanelle or some other form. They are invited to write a poem focusing on the subtitle to Taylor’s piece (i.e., “A reflection on my students”). The participants identify a suitable subject and explore it in verse. They are encouraged to base the poem on their professional experiences and devote the same amount of attention to the choice of language and figurative devices as they did when analyzing Taylor’s poem.

At any point in their writing, the participants can ask the facilitator for feedback and advice. Once they produce a first draft, they share it with a partner who is encouraged to provide constructive feedback. Towards the end of the workshop, those participants who feel comfortable reciting their drafts in front of their peers are invited to do so. The audience provides a response to each piece. The peer feedback and the facilitator's suggestions will be used to revise the draft in the participants' own time. This draft can either be the focus of the following workshop or else submitted to the facilitator for further feedback. Eventually, the participants' poems are published in print or electronically.

### **Conclusion**

This article started with the premise that in order for teachers to be effective in the poetry reading and writing class, they are required to position themselves as readers and writers of poetry. The two roles are intertwined, and if a teacher wants students to enjoy poetry, then it is imperative that the behaviors of a reader and writer are manifested in class. The workshop activity discussed above illustrates how critical reading can act as a platform for poetry writing. Most often teachers of poetry rely exclusively on a reader's perspective of a poem. The activity in this article hones teachers' sensitivity to poetry by enabling them to read a poem from the point of view of a writer. The chief value of the activity is that it underscores the equal importance of poetry reading and writing for teachers.

Prodding teachers to step into the shoes of a poet is not always easy, and a workshop facilitator has to patiently work on building participants' confidence as well as help them to develop the belief that poetry is not only the preserve of gifted individuals who are "born poets." However, if successful, the

benefits for teachers are significant. They might start seeing poetry as more accessible than they might have so far. They might realize that critical reading and writing are mutually reinforcing. And they might come to believe that poetry is not only a genre reserved solely for the classroom environment but can also be harnessed for the expression of one's personal thoughts and emotions. Most crucially, though, is that by positioning themselves in this way teachers have a better chance of making poetry far more engaging for their students.

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