

# Shared Writing via Contemporary Poetry

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## Abstract

This article describes how some basic tenets of shared writing can be applied to a class of 16-year-old L2 speakers of English preparing for a high stakes examination in which poetry is assessed by means of the traditional critical response. It examines how by means of this technique students who have never written any poetry can develop the confidence to write their own poems. By using a poem by Gerard Woodward as an example, this article also demonstrates that creative writing helps to boost students' engagement with the contemporary poetry they are expected to read for examination purposes.

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## Key words

*Shared writing, poetry, A-level English, literary criticism, upper secondary, collaboration*

## Introduction

After having had the opportunity of attending a talk by Pie Corbett on the use of shared writing, I became aware of the various benefits that can be derived by engaging students in creative writing activities during their lessons. A few days after this talk I attended a creative writing course led by the prize-winning poet Gerard Woodward and much of the writing we did during this course was spurred on by our reading and discussion of a number of contemporary poems. This made me reflect on the potential that creative writing has in terms of allowing students to engage with contemporary poetry, which they are expected to read with a critical perspective. I attended Woodward's course not because I saw myself as a budding poet but because I was interested in how creative writing is actually taught. These two events made me realise that Maltese students are missing out on a lot due to the fact

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that creative writing does not feature in the Advanced English syllabus. This article describes how some basic tenets of shared writing can be applied to a class of 16-year-old L2 speakers of English preparing for a high stakes examination in which poetry is assessed by means of the traditional critical response.

### **Creative writing and critical reading**

The majority of upper secondary students who took part in this study had never written any poetry before and felt somewhat strange about being asked to engage in a poetry writing activity. For them poetry writing went against the norm due to its exclusion from the syllabus and from their prior life and education. For many students this particular lesson was a breakthrough just because they were being asked to write verse. I was exploring uncharted ground, as it were, because I had access to a group of Maltese teenagers who had never written anything that they could consider a product of their own creativity and imagination. The only thing that approximates to the latter are the narrative essays that students are assigned as preparation for their examinations from their earliest primary school days and which are swiftly covered in red ink. Once they begin upper secondary education they are asked to write literary essays on a regular basis and this perpetuates the examination culture that Dymoke (2001) blames for stifling creativity and 'deadeningly' (p. 39) associating poetry solely with the kind of text type that is considered acceptable for examination purposes. However, the idea that the writing of literary essays can only be mastered by means of the writing of such essays is questioned by Rijlaarsdam and Van den Bergh (2004), who are aware of students' ability to transfer and adjust what they learn in one particular situation to a different one.

As early as 1991 Cox argued in favour of the teaching of creative writing in British schools and emphasised that students should not only be asked to write literary essays but should also be encouraged to tackle a variety of genres, including poetry. Poetry lessons in Malta seem to be very similar to the ones in the United States as described by Schillinger, Meyer and Vinz (2010), in which poetry writing is excluded from the lesson and students are rewarded for how well they can write about poetry. In what might be considered a long-awaited development, creative writing has finally been given some attention by being mentioned in the draft of Malta's first National Cultural Policy, which recognises the significance of students' right 'to be creators of art' (MECYS 2010: 36). This policy also indicates that teachers will soon be able to receive professional training in creative writing.

In light of the lacuna that has existed until now, the purpose of this piece of action research was to ascertain whether creative writing activities such as shared writing help students to engage with the kind of contemporary poetry they read during literary criticism lessons. Beach and Marshall (1991) acknowledge that there exists 'a necessary and organic connection between

the reading and writing of poetry that poets understand, students need to experience, and English teachers all too often forget' (p. 392). Cox (1991) sees the two as being 'intimately related' (p. 80) and while not demanding the abolition of the traditional literary criticism essay he feels that creative writing actually leads to a heightened critical awareness of a writer's style. Mitchell (2002), Dymoke (2003) and Wainwright (2004) suggest that students' knowledge of poetry improves both by reading a wide variety of poems and by being given the opportunity of actually writing poetry. Burdan (2004) concurs and points out that poetry writing is of real benefit to students when they engage in critical analysis. Beach, Appleman, Hynds and Wilhelm (2006) maintain that poetry writing helps students to take on the guise of a writer and to notice the use of poetic language and techniques. Schillinger, Meyer, and Vinz (2010) and Bluett (2010) too appreciate the connection between the reading and writing of poetry and according to the latter the act of reading poetry for writing purposes 'makes one engage with the poem in a very immediate and vital way' (p. 46).

In asking my students to participate in the activity described in this article I was prompted by an awareness of the above benefits and hence I did not feel that my lessons were a waste of my students' precious time. Moreover, besides thinking of how the shared writing was going to feed into their preparation for the literary criticism components of the examination, I was also aware of its capacity to 'crystallise a personal, felt response to a literary situation' (Collie and Slater 1987: 61) that perhaps a traditional essay could only begin to approximate.

### **Shared writing**

Beard (2004) reports that many of the principles and procedures that constitute shared writing are validated by the findings of psychological research. It is described as an activity in which the teacher acts as a scribe and the students, either as a class or else in small groups, help the teacher rewrite the model text. Booth and Swartz (2004) describe it as 'writing *with* students' (p. 74) and Palmer and Corbett (2003) underscore its importance by claiming that 'where teachers do not use shared writing, then they are not teaching writing' (p. 55). By means of this method the writing process is made clear to the students while they generate ideas and contribute to the writing of a text in a supportive environment. The latter is not to be discounted given that 'Trust is important if you want them to write poetry' (Mitchell 2002: 166).

Obied (2007) stresses the importance of collaborative poetry activities for bilingual students since they enhance the students' cognitive understanding of and engagement with the text. Moreover, since in the shared writing of a poem the students are engaged in exchanging ideas, writing, editing and rewriting the text, such an activity not only helps students to engage with poetry but also 'gives real and meaningful practice in all the skills of writing' (Spiro 2004: 10). The collaborative work on the process of writing is, in Cox's

(1991) opinion, what is missing from the product approach typical of traditional essay writing and this is why Oczkus (2007) equates the latter approach with 'a boring writing environment' (p. ix).

Even though shared writing is mostly suggested for younger learners, as can be seen from the importance it is given within the National Literacy Strategy in the UK (DfEE 2001), Routman (2005) is of the opinion that irrespective of the students' age shared writing should feature in every writing programme. She also indicates that one of the benefits of this method is the fact that besides writing it also reinforces and supports reading, partly by encouraging students to engage in close examination of texts. It is for the above reasons that I chose to use this technique with my class of novice poetry writers for whom English is a second language.

The poetry writing activity described in this article is loosely based on Palmer and Corbett's (2003) model of teaching shared writing to primary school students. This model was adapted to serve the needs of a class of upper secondary students reading Woodward's (2005) poem 'Shoes' during what the official timetable defined as a literary criticism lesson. Palmer and Corbett's (2003) model is based on three stages: imitation, innovation and invention (p. 49–51). Even though I use their terminology I am not entirely faithful to their suggested technique. For example, my students were given an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the model before rewriting it but not exactly in the manner suggested by Palmer and Corbett (2003). Before embarking on the actual shared writing activity, I felt that it was first necessary for my students to get to know 'Shoes' as well as possible and to discuss any ideas they had for the new poem. This happened during the group discussion and reformulation of the poem. The terms imitation, innovation and invention describe the shared writing of a tripartite poem given that the rewriting of each part required the students to engage in somewhat different activities.

### **Gerard Woodward's poem**

A poem from *We were Pedestrians* was used to motivate the students to write their own poem<sup>1</sup>.

#### *SHOES*

As he outgrows each pair of shoes,  
From mouse-like pumps  
To embryonic trainers, sparkling  
Jelly shoes, teddy bear slippers,

I take them and I burn them,  
Funnelling the ashes and oily  
Residues of each into a stoppered  
Glass jar and range them on a shelf,

The level of cinders increasing  
 With each, so that I have a broken  
 Path in my mind, of every  
 Step he's taken up till now.

According to Booth and Swartz (2004) teachers are meant to restrict the number of specific expectations when doing a shared writing activity with students. For this reason I felt that 'Shoes' was particularly suitable given that the progression through the poem in terms of levels of difficulty is gradual. It starts by listing shoes, moves on to a description of the speaker's actions, and concludes by presenting the abstract or thematic. Womelsduff (2005) thinks that teachers need to 'provide structures that support and direct student writing without being prescriptive or controlling' (p. 27). 'Shoes' offered my students a structure that they could gradually follow until they reached the point at which they could actually engage in independent writing. Moreover, given the novelty of poetry writing for my students, for the purposes of this study they were not expected to explore actual poetic technique; this could wait till future lessons.

### **Action research data**

Given that I wanted to gauge the efficacy of shared writing in my classroom, I asked all sixteen students to fill in a feedback form. This was given to them at the termination of the one-hour lesson and they were asked for brief comments about each one of the shared writing activity stages described below. Moreover, six students were subsequently interviewed in further detail about their experience during the lesson. The students' feedback complemented the detailed notes I compiled immediately after the lesson when I reflected on its strengths and shortcomings.

### **Group discussion**

According to Dymoke (2009) 'poetry is a playful, multimodal medium rather than one destined to be stranded for ever on the printed page' (p. 80) and in Blake's opinion (2009) a multimodal approach helps teachers to 'develop an engaged enjoyment and appreciation of poetry' as well as 'creative and critical thinking' (p. 28). For these reasons I chose to show the students an animated version of 'Shoes' before actually giving them a printed copy of the poem. Then I asked the students to form groups of four and labelled each group: A, B, C, D. On the board, I listed a number of questions that were meant to help them discuss the poem's core components and structure:

Who is the speaker?  
 About whom is the speaker talking?  
 What's the main theme?  
 What's the main function of each stanza?

Even though some of my students pointed out that I could have probably dispensed with these questions since 'it's part of what we've been trained to

look for', I still felt that it was necessary to provide them with a bit of guidance. And actually the questions managed to get the majority of the class going. I chose these questions because I wanted the students to think indirectly about what McQuail (2010) describes as communication's 'pattern and direction of flow' (p. 18), the way it takes place, its content and outcomes.

The students read the poem and discussed it together while the animated version played in the background. They also answered the four questions and then we discussed the views of each group as a class. By talking about the poem together in small groups the students felt they were learning from one another and that the teacher was no longer the fount of wisdom supplying them with the keys to the correct meaning of the poem. For example, Samantha<sup>2</sup> said that 'it's interesting to hear others' opinion on the poem' while David felt that 'I can tell others what I think the poem means to me and compare this to what it's saying to them.' Another student remarked that 'group discussions are very rare during our English lessons. I would love to do this for every single poem we read.' This reminds me of Vakil's (2008) idea that what a teacher gets out of the whole process of creative writing is a diminishment of his or her 'static authority' (p. 165).

Mitchell (2002) describes how when she shared one of her poems in class she first asked the students to offer their interpretations then provided them with her own thoughts on the poem. She emphasised to them that the writer's presence in class did not discredit their own readings. This led me to adopt a similar procedure when sharing Woodward's thoughts on the poem with my students. After seeing that each student had sufficiently contributed to the discussion of 'Shoes', I showed the class a slide with the poet's comments on his work:

*The main impulse of the poem was to say something about the way we preserve memories of children as they grow up. I did save my children's shoes – they are very expressive of them as people (very small people), and the shoe is probably the most personalised form of garment because it seems to mould itself around the foot, it bears traces of use etc, etc. Plus they get through shoes very quickly as they grow up, and there seem bewilderingly wide varieties of shoes available, so many different sorts that, together, they almost form a unique 'thumbprint' of the child's identity. The idea of burning them and preserving the ashes takes this a little step further (I didn't do this in reality – but I'd heard of someone else who had). The final image is of a cinder path divided between the jars – path=shoes=journey=life which I felt brought together all my feelings about those things*  
(G. Woodward, correspondence with D. Xerri, 15 October 2010).

The students felt that this other perspective on the text helped them to familiarise themselves better with what had inspired Woodward to compose the poem. Alison remarked that 'It would have never crossed my mind that a shoe is a thumbprint of identity' and David found that 'It's incredible how he transformed a weird anecdote into something so original.' The students got to see how the writing process was sparked by the combination of a number of elements. They claimed that Woodward's personal comments augmented their appreciation of what went into the poem and did not detract from their reading of it. According to one student's feedback Woodward's comments were 'Illuminating! I know what made him put pen to paper' while another student stated that 'The slide threw further light on the poem and merged with our discussion of it'.

### **Group reformulation**

Milian (2005) suggests that students derive a number of benefits from the act of speaking about their writing and she considers reformulation to be one means of helping students to achieve a 'metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness ... through conversation while participating in a shared writing task' (p. 335). With this in mind I asked the students to take a blank sheet of paper and write the title 'Shoes' at the top. Upon telling them that we were going to rewrite Woodward's poem I immediately sensed a bit of resistance. As I explained above, these students had never written any poetry before and hence this was a radically new experience for them. Moreover, some of them also pointed out that 'it's not right' to change the words in a poem. When I asked them why, they said that poems were artistic creations and so it was not appropriate to do so. I explained that we were going to rewrite it in order to try and understand it better and so that we could better comprehend how a poem is actually written. Given that 'excessive reverence for a text does not necessarily improve our understanding of it', Duff and Maley (2007) affirm that by 'de-sacralising' (p. 8) a text students stand a better chance of feeling confident and overcoming cultural inhibitions.

I asked the students to think of a new speaker, a new subject, a new relationship and a new theme. I also asked them to think of an audience for their poem and to plan the content collaboratively. This new poem had to have the same structure as Woodward's poem and thus each stanza had to have the same function. It was also important that the second stanza would describe something somewhat out of the ordinary or strange. The students discussed these issues together in groups of four and made notes of what would feature in their new poem and of how they would go about writing it. After a while I asked each group for the ideas they had come up with. These are some of their suggestions: a friend borrowing her friend's shoes, a tramp rummaging through a man's litter bin for discarded shoes, a voyeur stealing shoes from a woman's house.



Not all the groups of students during my lesson had managed to develop their ideas beyond the relationship stage and this was probably because it constituted the first and most important hurdle in the reformulation process. After considering the originality and interest of the different ideas proposed by the different groups, we finally settled on one specific relationship, that of a daughter pinching her mother's shoes from the cellar. As pointed out by Alison, it was 'interesting how we chose the topsy-turvy idea' given that the relationship we agreed to base our poem on was actually an inversion of that described in Woodward's poem.

### **Imitation**

Together, we started by rewriting Woodward's first stanza. 'Shoes' perhaps is somewhat limited in terms of what students can include in their rewriting of the first stanza. Something like 'The Door' by Miroslav Holub (1967) might be a better springboard for students' creativity and that is perhaps why it is frequently suggested in shared writing materials for younger students. However, the students at this stage were merely imitating the model in a very basic fashion. They would get plenty of opportunities to be innovative and inventive in the subsequent stages of this activity.

I use Palmer and Corbett's (2003) term 'imitation' to describe what the students needed to do when rewriting Woodward's first stanza. Given that this stanza is fairly straightforward and involves for the most part the act of listing shoes, I felt that my students could easily imitate this when writing their own stanza. The rewriting of the first stanza only entailed substituting the shoes Woodward mentions with shoes a middle-aged woman would wear. However, the students were told to keep in mind that 'outgrows' in the first line is a key word and hence they needed to come up with something as equally effective. Such close attention to the vocabulary and grammar of the model text is recommended by Booth and Swartz (2004) as a means of mastering how a poet creates a desired effect and leaves an impact on the reader. According to one student's feedback, 'I found it really useful when we racked our brains on the verb to use in the first line. I realised how tough it must be to choose the right word'.

In this stage and the following ones I used questions both as a means of eliciting from the students and in order to 'verify and consolidate ... understanding' (Booth and Swartz 2004: 74). We worked as a class and the students supplied a variety of ideas and together we discussed the ones to include in our piece of shared writing. Following Booth and Swartz's (2004) advice I constantly explained why one word was preferable to another and what our decisions were based on. Corbett (2010) emphasises the need for teachers to guide their students towards the most original and creative words and ideas and to discourage them from opting for clichés. The teacher should push and push the students to come up with the not so ordinary. As much as possible I sought to create an environment similar to the one Dymoke (2003) describes, in which students 'are hungry to share their immediate reactions and



to spark off each other's ideas' (p. 44). This is the stanza that my students ultimately produced by working in a collaborative manner:

*As she dumps each pair of shoes,  
From stiletto heels  
To beaded sandals, towering  
Boots, glove-like trainers,*

The students here show that they made a conscious effort to simultaneously imitate the model and produce something reflecting their own ability to use language in an original fashion.

### **Innovation**

For the rewriting of the second stanza the students had to keep in mind that 'take' and 'burn' in Woodward's poem are of crucial importance because they are describing an unusual kind of behaviour on the speaker's part. So the students had to replace these words and to think of something that would be considered equally uncommon and interesting. Their choice of verbs would help introduce the speaker and would tell the reader a lot about the speaker's identity and behaviour. These two verbs were fundamental because in a way they determined how the rest of the poem would develop. I also pointed out that these verbs might lead them to revise the first stanza in order to better reflect their choice of speaker and in fact the stanza reproduced above is the product of the students' willingness to revise their own work. A focus on grammar during a shared writing activity is addressed as part of the UK's National Literacy Strategy (DfEE 2000). Highlighting the significance of these verbs was for me an opportunity to make the students think about grammar within a creative context and in a way this betrays an alignment with Spiro's (2004) idea that 'a focus on form and language is exactly what makes poetry different from other written texts' (p. 7). According to Diane 'poetry lessons are usually all about the theme' while another student's feedback indicated that 'it's only when we played with the words and their meanings that I saw how much goes into a poem'.

Given that we had decided to use the daughter-mother relationship as the basis of our poem, the students thought of a variety of actions that their speaker could perform with the discarded shoes and finally we agreed that the idea of pinching the shoes from the cellar and hiding them in the darkness beneath the bed was the most appealing one. Their choice was an attempt to be innovative and thus to start breaking away from Woodward's poem. This is what they came up with after a number of revisions:

*I pinch them and I hide them,  
Stacked beneath my bed  
Where it's too dark to see  
And I need to feel for each one,*

This stanza shows that at this stage of the activity the model was still somewhat directing the students' writing but it also displays that they had collaboratively found the means to steer away from it and develop their idea of a daughter stealing her mother's shoes. In fact, Samantha felt that 'by that stage we had already transformed the original poem into something we could call our own'.

### **Invention**

When it came to rewriting the third stanza we realised that this would also partly depend on the choices the students had made in the second one in relation to the speaker's actions and identity. However, they needed to keep in mind that in the third stanza the subject is once again important so this involved connecting the speaker, the shoes and the subject in some way or other. The missing ingredient they had to discover was an overarching theme that would give unity to the whole poem just as in Woodward's 'Shoes'.

By this stage the level of enthusiasm demonstrated by the students did not form part of the parameters of a conventional poetry lesson as they understood it to be. Sensing the students' longing to go on writing I asked them to finish the poem on their own at home by writing the last stanza. I felt that the students were fully capable of 'applying the familiar to the unfamiliar' (Spiro 2004: 7), that is, using what they had learnt during the shared writing activity in order to complete the poem. I indicated to them that they would be sharing their poem with their classmates and this was meant to provide them with the audience of real readers that Cox (1991) considers as being essential in order for creative writing to come to life, something that the traditional literary essay does not really provide them with.

During the following lesson I asked each student to recite his or her poem, which thus became partly a collaborative effort and partly the fruit of that student's own personal creativity. Even though some students found it very hard to write the last stanza and to be original and inventive, the majority of them gave it a try and some of them produced interesting results. The following are three examples of what the students produced when asked to complete autonomously what had started as a collaborative effort:

*The line beneath my bed increasing  
With each, so that I have an image  
Of what I will look like when I grow up,  
A reflection of my mother.*  
Susan

*The variation of shoes never ending,  
Each one leaving me an assortment  
Of colours along the floor, a track  
Of the different roles she plays.*  
Matthew

*The mountain of shoes growing  
Steadily, so that I have a stupendous  
Secret treasured in my room,  
Foreshadowng the woman I shall be.*  
Diane

By means of these examples it can be seen that the students managed to complete the activity with varying degrees of success and that though some of them still heavily relied on Woodward's model some others did attempt to be original. The fact that they had to depend on their own abilities when writing this last stanza might have motivated some students to keep consulting the model whereas the others felt much more comfortable with the transition from collaboration to autonomy.

After each reading, I encouraged the kind of peer response and assessment that Beach and Marshall (1991) and Dymoke (2003) suggest. It was clear to me that the students felt comfortable with the whole process of reading their work and listening to their classmates' comments because they had overcome any sense of intimidation by first working collaboratively before doing so independently. One student's feedback indicated that 'after having worked on [the poem] together it wasn't a problem for me to read out my work' while another student thought that 'when we got to talk about each other's poems I felt that everyone was listening for once'. It is for such reasons that Sautter (1991) describes the act of sharing one's writing with others and inviting response as a community-building activity.

The next step in the process of being inventive was to ask the students to think of a person they loved or loathed, feared or despised and an object that was closely associated with that person. Debatably enough this task invited the students to explore potentially painful and personal experiences and this was prompted by my curiosity in relation to Erixon's (2004) idea of whether students are willing to overcome the boundaries between the classroom and private environments when writing poetry. Given that 'writing poetry using new media offers a fresh way to engage them in the writing process' (Hughes 2008: 161), the students were asked to create animated poems based on this subject. However, the poems that resulted out of this independent writing activity will need to be discussed elsewhere.

### **Outcomes**

According to Corbett (2010), shared writing overcomes students' fear by means of collaboration. They are afraid to fail, hence modelling and writing together with the teacher is an essential first step. Beach and Marshall (1991) actually see the use of models as a means of making the act of writing poetry seem less daunting. A number of the students I subsequently interviewed remarked that they would not have had the confidence to write any poetry on their own because (in Maria's words) 'I was afraid of it not being good enough'. This

seems to confirm the idea that when students write poetry for the first time they feel 'skeptical about how their work will be received' (Mitchell 2002: 166). During the different stages of the activity the students also demonstrated an appreciation and understanding of the writing process and this is in line with Humphris's (2010) suggestion that collaboration leads to a heightened metacognitive understanding. The students claimed that the initial group discussion of Woodward's poem made them feel in charge of the text and by working in small groups they found the confidence to share their ideas with the rest of the class during the shared writing activity. Diane mentioned that 'It made me feel safe' and Andrew claimed that he 'enjoyed discussing it with the others ... just the four of us.'

The students also pointed out that the writing activity made them feel more confident about their reading of Woodward's poem because by imitating the model and recasting it they could better understand the poet's technique and use of language. 'I feel I know what it's all about ... why he used certain words ... what effect he was aiming for', said Maria in relation to this. This seems to support Spiro's (2004) suggestion that by putting themselves in the writer's shoes 'students will also be more active and confident in their enjoyment of reading' (p. 10). I found that the students enjoyed playing with the language used by an expert writer and that they gradually discovered the courage to use their reading of poetry in order to compose their own poems. The students' feedback indicates that the majority of them 'really enjoyed this lesson' and quite a number of them asked whether we could do similar activities in the future. The continuation of such activities is highly significant since 'With writing and teaching writing you have to be in it for the long haul' (Turvey 2007: 158).

The high level of engagement registered amongst my students corroborates the idea that even when teaching poetry for examinations it is still imperative 'to use as many active approaches as you can' (Dymoke 2009: 94). Most importantly it prompted me to start using such poetry writing activities during my lessons despite the absence of any reference to creative writing in the Advanced level English syllabus.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The poem *Shoes* by Gerard Woodward is published here by kind permission of the author.

<sup>2</sup> Students' names have been changed.

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