



Enjoyment and Understanding?

Poetry Pedagogy for Student Engagement

T.S. Eliot argued that enjoyment and understanding in poetry should be indivisible. **Daniel Xerri** weighs up the arguments about how best to encourage both together in the teaching of poetry.

Questions of poetry

The editors of a special issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* devoted to poetry pedagogy posed the questions: 'Is poetry an outmoded form of expression, resting high on a pedestal, unseen and seldom encountered except in an examination? Is it a text to be quarried for techniques?' (Manuel *et al.*, 2013). In another special issue devoted to poetry in the classroom, the editors of *English Journal* asked readers: 'How can teachers ensure that poetry lives in, through, and with all the young people who will populate and lead our future generations?' (Gorlewski & Gorlewski, 2015). These questions seem to indicate the significance that poetry pedagogy plays in making poetry an engaging genre that is not only enjoyed at school but continues to be a vital part of young people's lives long after they finish their studies (Xerri, 2014, 2016).

Enjoyment and understanding?

'The key to active, involved reading of literature is engagement with a text', claim Beach *et al.*, (2006, p. 170) – and certainly students' engagement with a poem seems to be one of the most desirable objectives of the teaching of poetry. The way this engagement is instigated in a lesson entails a sense of enjoyment on the part of teachers and students. The poet T. S. Eliot (1956) does not conceive of '**enjoyment and understanding** as distinct activities—one emotional and the other intellectual' (p. 540). The two activities are interdependent and 'To understand a poem comes to the same thing as to enjoy it for the right reasons' (Eliot, 1956, p. 540). According to Fleming and Stevens (2015), 'It is a delicate pedagogical challenge to ensure that explicit knowledge enhances rather than detracts from enjoyment and appreciation' (p. 177).



“Teacher-led pedagogy gives primacy to the teacher’s role in the critical reading of poetry and risks underestimating the significance of student engagement.”

A pedagogy that fosters students’ engagement is characterised by a number of qualities. For Whitehead (1966), ‘what matters in our poetry lessons is the occasion when, for someone at least, reading a poem is felt to be important in a personal sense, a significant mode of experience’ (p. 93). Stratta *et al.* (1973) point out that ‘*The disappearance of the dais necessarily implies new relationships between pupil and teacher*’, and thus the adoption of a new pedagogy: ‘*the teacher needs to be more akin to a producer, with the pupils as actors; or a leader of a group preparing a presentation, where pupils explore texts in an active manner learning in the course of performing*’ (p. 44). This is akin to a ‘*dialogic engagement*’ (Blake, 2008, p. 29) with poetry.

Similarly, Millum (2008) suggests that there needs to be ‘*an involvement with poems... A creative involvement in which we are not just looking at poems and making notes on them but getting into them*’ (p. 22). He thinks that by means of such involvement students not only improve their grades but also ‘*develop a lifelong passion*’ for poetry; that is why it is ‘*worth taking the time, now and then, to really try to get under the skin of some of the poems you encounter*’ (Millum, 2008, p. 23). Developing this kind of long-term engagement might entail combining poetry and critical thinking (Hakes, 2008) or teaching poetry through an interdisciplinary approach, such as by allying it with music, drama and art (Stevens, 2011). It might also involve dissociating poetry from the strict confines of the classroom as happens in the flipped classroom model, which is meant to reinforce active learning and thus prevent a teacher-centred, transmissive pedagogy (Keengwe *et al.*, 2014). A pedagogy that bolsters student engagement seems to necessitate not only a reconceptualization of the approaches that are typically adopted in a poetry lesson but also a reconfiguration of the traditional stances adopted by teachers and students.

Teacher, student, poem

Forty years ago, the Bullock Report in the UK criticized certain endemic problems in the teaching of poetry, especially the use of an analytical approach that prioritises specific critical judgements and by means of which the teacher approaches a poem as ‘*a repository of answers to which he possesses the key*’ (DES, 1975, p. 131). Since then poetry pedagogy has not changed all that much.

The teaching of poetry in secondary education in a number of contexts around the world is meant to help students develop the skills to read and write about a variety of poems in a critical manner. Developing such skills might sometimes involve a process that can lead teachers to adopt a pedagogy that emphasises modelling the style of close reading, arguably pushing students into the role of bystanders and sacrificing personal engagement. The teacher is at the centre of the arena and the students are meant to learn by observing the master-reader as he or she unravels the poem. The teacher might ask questions, 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, p. 148). The students feel they have to provide the right answers to a set of questions that might not be genuinely seeking new information but are there to test the kind of understanding the teacher is looking for.

A teacher-led process of inductive questioning seems to be the most traditional approach to poetry in the classroom (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988; Fleming & Stevens, 2015). 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, p. 50) students read the poem. Hughes’s (2009) description of her experiences at school probably resonates with those of many teachers and students:

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. This is something that also happened to Shakespearean drama once it became part of English as taught in schools and universities (Murphy, 2008).

The puzzle of the poem

The stance adopted by teachers during poetry lessons can help perpetuate the myth that a poem is an enigmatic text that can only be made accessible by means of the teacher’s elucidation of its meaning. By adopting ‘*the position of supreme arbiter*’ (Stratta *et al.*, 1973, p. 41), a teacher will not help students develop

their own personal response to a text and will merely compel them to accept the opinion of an expert reader. This only serves to make students 'passive' and leads them to perceive reading as if it were 'a kind of detective work, a cracking of codes and solving of mysteries, having little or no relevance to life as they live it beyond school' (Stratta et al., 1973, p. 42). In turn, a mechanical analysis of poetry becomes the only appropriate way of reading a poem. In criticising such an approach, Fleming and Stevens (2015) posit that

The argument...is not that poems should never be analysed; it is after all a key means of developing sensitivity to language; appropriate analysis can inform emotional and aesthetic response. The point is that the teacher needs to be aware of the difficulties which may arise and take steps to ensure that they do not become an insurmountable barrier. (p. 185)

An analytical approach should ideally be counterbalanced with activities that 'guide students into the study of poems without forcing them to accept the teacher's interpretations' (Elkins, 1976, p. 190). Such activities would hopefully tap students' creativity and transform them from passive into active readers of poetry. According to Wright (2005), 'brilliant teachers understand that, while they don't have the author in the classroom, they do have readers, and readers are central to the process' (p. 44). For this reason, Naylor and Wood (2012) argue that 'to motivate and really engage young people with poetry, we have to engage with critical ideas about the way that readers respond to texts and bring their own responses to texts, particularly poetic ones' (p. 15).

This would entail a familiarity on the part of teachers with reader-response theory, in particular the works of Rosenblatt (1994, 1995) and Iser (1978, 1988), both of whom underscore the significance of the active role that readers play when reading texts and generating meanings. Reader-response theory 'can help with how we approach teaching poetry, with regard to making poetry fun and empowering pupils to contribute their own ideas with confidence and enthusiasm' (Naylor & Wood, 2012, p. 21). Ensuring that teachers possess the necessary knowledge of reader-response theory might serve to realign the balance of power in the poetry classroom and invite a more active role on students' part.

The way poetry is approached in the classroom also affects students' reading of a poem:

If classroom teaching has encouraged a view of poetry as something with a meaning stubbornly hidden in the text and revealed only to the fortunate few, many readers are likely to do no more than engage in making probing guesses, hoping that somehow the poem's meaning will occur to them. (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988, p. 35)

Some teachers attempt to give students the impression that the analytical approach used to unearth a poem's meaning is objective. Even when students come to realise that this is not so they still feel 'inhibited about trusting their own response' and embark on the unseen component 'in fear and trembling' (Scott, 1989, p. 33). Such an approach obviously 'implies that poetry is something locked away like the best china, and that a special key needs to be fetched before you can get at it' (Strauss, 1993, p. vii). Consequently, the misconception arises that since the teacher is the one holding the key students should rely on their teacher to be given access to a poem's mysteries.

Beyond meaning?

A pedagogy that seeks to broaden students' definitions of poetry seems to be a significant way of developing their attitudes, beliefs and practices in relation to the genre. Fleming and Stevens (2015) consider it important that students be encouraged to pay 'attention to the genre itself, not to pursue strict definitions of poetry but to examine the way different texts require different types of reading' (p. 185). In agreement with this, Stibbs (2000) maintains that when teaching poems 'we too easily slip into discussing their content or extratextual import rather than their intratextual, aesthetic features, because poems use the same medium as social and moral discourse—words' (p. 37). He considers it a problem that 'Poetry teaching has been spoiled by an understandable succumbing to the temptation to treat poetry as if it were perversely if mellifluously worded prose' (Stibbs, 2000, pp. 40-41). For this reason he calls for renewed attention to aesthetics in poetry pedagogy so that students may come to appreciate the effects of sound and structure rather than focusing solely on meaning.

Barrs and Styles (2013) concur with this idea and state that 'one of the big problems of poetry education is that it is the easily identifiable formal features of poems that often become the focus of attention, and that assume disproportionate importance in the minds of both teachers and students' (p. 184). Snapper (2013) claims that 'In the teaching of poetry ... we particularly see the ways in which reductive, de-aestheticized approaches can disable the text, cutting it off from its full expression' (p. 40). He blames such pedagogy for students' resistance to poetry. Effective poetry pedagogy probably puts a premium on the aesthetic qualities of a poem. Ensuring that teachers' and students' definition of poetry is adequately enlarged and that the genre's aesthetic features are prioritized might lead to increased engagement in the poetry classroom.

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Gatekeepers to poetry?

Benton (1999) reports that ‘far from facilitating pupils’ learning and engagement with poetry some teachers felt constrained to adopt strategies which they felt actively hindered it’ (p. 521). These strategies are mainly those associated with a highly analytical approach to the teaching of poetry that assigns teachers the privileged role of explaining to their students the hidden meaning of a poem. Dymoke (2003) criticises ‘The notion of poetry as a puzzle’ which she finds to be ‘a common perception among students (and their teachers) who engage in a hunt for the missing clue which will help them solve the poem’ (p. 3). Fleming and Stevens (2015) point out that ‘The problem with the traditional inductive question and answer approach to poetry is that it rarely made enough room for pupils to engage with the text’ (p. 186). Burdan (2004) agrees with this and claims that ‘For many students, literary analysis is primarily a means by which their teachers demarcate the gap between the students’ naive or inept readings of literature and their own, more sophisticated ones’ (p. 23). Rather than confidently exploring the poem, students seek to guess what the teacher already knows is hidden in the text.

The belief that reading poetry involves an interaction with the poem during which the reader discovers its meaning is responsible for such a lack of confidence on the students’ part. Fleming and Stevens (2015) maintain that

An obsession with ‘complete’ understanding which contains a misguided view of the way language has meaning may prevent us from using and enjoying the text. The resonance of language can haunt us and continue to unfold before we grasp its full meaning. Even the concept of ‘full’ meaning may be suspect because understanding can usually be enriched in some way. (p. 184)

According to Burdan (2004), ‘This misunderstanding of reading is further complicated by a view of the literature classroom as a territory too perilous for uninitiated and inexperienced readers to explore’ (p. 23). Hence, students adopt the guise of observers rather than participants and read in order to find out what the poet is saying or what they think their teacher understands the poet is saying (Burdan, 2004). This seems to have a long lasting effect.

Pasquin (2010) describes the surprise of a group of trainee teachers when she asked them to avoid analysing a poem. She explains that this reaction was due to the fact that ‘they had struggled with the meaning of poetry all through their high school years and now a poem presented itself as a problem to be solved, in a fashion that must please the teacher and the examiner’ (Pasquin, 2010, p. 256). Acting as if trapped in a vicious circle, teachers probably forge this practice out of their own experience of poetry at school, especially if the emphasis was predominantly on literary analysis rather than enjoyment (O’Hara, 1999; Ray, 1999). By adopting the stance of gatekeepers to poetry, some teachers help to consolidate students’ belief that a poem will remain inscrutable as long as a teacher is not present to help them unravel its meaning by means of a highly analytical approach. Hence, developing attitudes and beliefs in relation to poetry is as vital as enhancing classroom practices.

Pedagogy for engagement

When a democratic classroom environment is created in which students’ opinions matter as much as those of the teacher, student engagement is facilitated. 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 & Gregory, 2006, p. 136).

This kind of pedagogy values students' contributions and seeks to devise means by which they may flourish. It helps to foster opportunities for deep learning, which is defined as 'the process through which an individual becomes capable of taking what was learned in one situation and applying it to new situations' (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012, p. 5). It is a necessary pedagogy considering that one of the most powerful effects on learning is when learners become their own teachers (Hattie, 2012).

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