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## POETRY TEACHING IN MALTA

### The interplay between teachers' beliefs and practices

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#### Introduction

Most research on poetry education identifies curricular and assessment constraints as the main factor for a lack of engagement with poetry on behalf of teachers and students (Benton, 2000; Dymoke, 2001, 2002, 2012; O'Neill, 2006). While it is undeniable that assessment plays a significant role in shaping classroom practices, to point an accusatory finger solely at assessment is to ignore its collusion with the shared beliefs held by teachers and students (Xerri, 2013a). Rather than on its own, it is in combination with these beliefs that assessment plays a pivotal role in moulding engagement with poetry.

As shown by comparative research (Peel, Patterson, & Gerlach, 2000), beliefs about English have played an important role in the formation of the subject due to how they determine classroom practices. Hence, it is helpful to start by defining these constructs and identifying the possible links between them. Borg (2001) defines a belief as 'a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour' (p. 186). According to the American Psychological Association (2009), a belief is 'acceptance of the truth, reality, or validity of something ... particularly in the absence of substantiation' (p. 54). Beliefs help to form practices. For example, a review commissioned by the Sutton Trust, an educational think tank in the UK, found that one of the six components of effective teaching consists of teacher beliefs due to some evidence of impact on student outcomes (Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, & Elliot Major, 2014, p. 3). Practice is defined as 'doing, performance, action' but it 'can also take the form of habitualized and institutionalized ways of doing something. This applies to all professional activities (e.g. teaching)' (Collins & O'Brien, 2011, pp. 362–363).

Research indicates that in many international contexts the interplay between beliefs and practices seems quite significant (OECD, 2009). This chapter seeks to explore how teachers' beliefs are related to their practices within the context of poetry education.

While poetry education lacks substantial research in this area (Wilson, 2010; Xerri, 2015), teachers' beliefs and practices and the relationship between them have been scrutinized by a wide range of studies in the field of language learning and teaching (e.g. Uysal & Bardakci, 2014). Given that such research is to a large extent missing from the field of poetry education, this chapter seeks to shed some light on teachers' beliefs about poetry and how these affect their practices.

### Maltese post-16 educational context

The discussion presented in this chapter is largely based on research that took place in the post-16 educational context in Malta (Xerri, 2015). The country gained independence from the British Empire in 1964 after having been a colony since 1800. It joined the European Union in 2004. Maltese and English are the country's two official languages, with the latter being the second language for the majority of the population (Sciriha & Vassallo, 2006).

In Malta, education is compulsory up to the age of 16. In a country with a population of less than half a million, in 2011–2012, 5,960 students were enrolled in post-16 institutions (National Statistics Office, 2014), which typically prepare students for the Matriculation Certificate examination. Students hoping to be awarded the Matriculation Certificate and thus continue their studies at university need to obtain a pass in two Advanced level subjects and in four Intermediate level subjects.

Matriculation Certificate examinations are designed and administered by the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) Examinations Board, which is affiliated to the University of Malta. Up to 1997, Maltese students sat for GCE Advanced level examinations offered by examination boards in the UK. Despite the fact that MATSEC decided that Malta should have its own homegrown Advanced level examinations, the educational system remains closely modelled on the one in the UK. For example, just as in the UK, in Malta A-levels are usually studied over a two-year period at a sixth form college that in most cases is independent of secondary education institutions.

Various post-16 institutions in Malta offer their students the opportunity of studying English at Advanced level and all these courses gravitate towards one examination. The Matriculation Certificate English examination measures candidates' success in their two-year course of study and enables them to gain admission to university; therefore its nature is that of a selective test. As an examination, its content is heavily biased in favour of literature components. Partly due to its colonial heritage, the study of English in Malta has for many decades valued the importance of a literary education, which is largely centred on the Anglo-American literary tradition. This means that literature is for the most

part taught in the same way that it is taught to native speakers of English and for similar purposes.

The Matriculation Certificate English examination is a 9-hour examination made up of 3 papers and a 15-minute speaking examination. Candidates' knowledge of poetry is assessed in Paper 1, in which they are expected to answer an essay question on a set collection of poems (e.g. Wilfred Owen's war poems), and a question based on an unseen poem. In the latter component, candidates write an essay about a poem they would not have studied at school.

## The study

This chapter synthesizes the discussion of some of the findings of a mixed methods study conducted at a post-16 institution in Malta (Xerri, 2015). Its participants consisted of eight poetry teachers, who were each observed teaching one 60-minute literary criticism seminar based on an unseen poem. The instrument used for this purpose consisted of an observation scheme that combined quantitative and qualitative components. An events checklist with time sampling was used to form a clear picture of the occurrence of a specific set of lesson events across the different observed sessions and to be able to make comparisons. A rating scale was completed at the end of each observed lesson in order to help determine the presence or absence of certain general events and behaviours. Observation notes were also taken in order to record any thoughts and questions evoked by what was observed in each session. After every observed lesson, the teacher in question participated in a semi-structured interview held in a one-to-one manner that lasted around 40 minutes. The data analysis process employed a balance of deductive and inductive coding.

## Conceptions of poetry

The teachers in the study seemed to share conceptions of poetry that were seemingly influenced by Romantic notions of the genre. Their difficulty in defining poetry was motivated by their understanding of poetry as something that eluded conceptualization. They deemed poetry to be an inspired use of language that facilitated the expression of something deeply buried and which granted the reader access to emotional and cognitive insights.

The teachers shared the belief that poetry was an important genre that needed to be studied at school. This was mostly related to its capacity for personal growth and the development of 'insights' on life and the self. In this they seemed convinced of 'the effect that poetry can have on our perceptions, that is, on the way we see the world' (Jollimore, 2009, p. 132). Moreover, the teachers expressed the belief that the study of poetry provided access to some kind of durable set of values that transcended transitory and frivolous concerns. They seemed to consider the poet to be in a privileged position and the reader's task to be that of gleaning the wisdom within poetry. The fact that most of the teachers

were opposed to poetry writing in class seemed to confirm that for them poetic expression was the preserve of a privileged few due to the belief that 'a poet is born not made' and that poetry was a product of talent and inspiration, not training. Sloan (2003) suggests that such conceptions are deep-rooted and pernicious. They go counter to the idea that creative writing is best fostered by teachers who are willing to engage in it themselves and who see themselves as writers (NAWE, 2010). The teachers' beliefs implied that the only poetry activity worthy of a classroom context was the analytical search for whatever truths the poet had hidden in the text. Dymoke (2009) suggests that such conceptions of poetry have helped to underscore its supremacy over other genres and, in the process, damage teachers' and students' relationship with it. The teachers' mystification of poetry stopped it from being seen as something accessible and enjoyable.

One of the reasons for which the teachers enjoyed teaching poetry was its challenging nature, this also being the reason for which they claimed not to read it for pleasure. Nemerov (1972) affirms that 'There is a sort of reader who finds everything difficult if it happens to be written in verse ... Such readers really have a very simple problem: they don't like poetry, even though some of them feel they ought to' (p. 24). The fact that the teachers were aware that students found poetry difficult made them prize the analytical skills developed via literary criticism seminars, skills seemingly employed to discover meaning in a poem. In fact, during half of the observed lessons teachers were noted encouraging students to look for a specific meaning in the text by means of an analytical approach. Their belief that poetry was intrinsically opaque was consonant with Reddy's (2010) admission that 'As a teacher of poetry, I try to encourage my students to cultivate a fascination with what's difficult about this art ... I tell them, poetry isn't for wimps' (pp. 7–8). However, Reddy (2010) also admits that 'the difficulty inherent to poetic expression is what makes this form of writing so marginal in our culture today' (p. 8).

The teachers' preference for reading a poem rather than listening to it was because of their belief that poetry required intense concentration in order for its meaning to become apparent. They seemed to be aware that students conceived of poetry as made up of riddles to be solved (Dymoke, 2003) and they claimed to discourage students from adopting such a stance. However, the observed lessons demonstrated that the opposite tended to happen. In a sense these poetry lessons were restrictive by not enabling students to achieve what Lamarque (2009a) considers the mark of a poetically sensitive reader: 'To read poetry (of any kind) as *poetry* is to adopt a certain attitude of mind, a receptiveness, among other things, to finegrained expression, the salience of perspective, and the play of images' (pp. 51–52). The almost exclusive attention given to poetry's meaning encouraged a reductive view of the genre, one in which hidden meaning is conceived of as some kind of message intentionally buried in the poem by its creator. The prominence given to poetry's meaning seemed to almost eclipse anything else associated with poetry, leading to an approach that could potentially dampen students' engagement (Fleming & Stevens, 2015).

## Poetry classroom practices

The study's observation sessions showed that the main poetry lesson event consisted of the teacher explaining the poem from the front of the classroom. The level of initiation on the part of students was minimal, their participation being mostly limited to responding to teachers' open and closed questions, the latter being more common. The students' participation did not seem to be carefully planned and almost all the observed teachers failed to encourage students to work autonomously. Moreover, most of the teachers did not encourage students to come up with their own personal response to the poem and instead provided them with one specific reading of it. Cumming (2007) criticizes such pedagogy for failing to consider students' own contribution to a poetry lesson: 'if there is no opportunity to link a child's love of playing with language with what they are expected to learn about poetry in class, then that which they have could become irrelevant and devalued in school' (p. 99).

The way they engaged with poetry in class seemed to lead to ambivalent reactions on the part of the teachers in the study. They claimed to enjoy the experience of teaching poetry but at the same time they considered it onerous. Despite the fact that they affirmed that in teaching poetry they gave importance to a poem's use of language and its potential for personal enrichment, in the observed lessons the emphasis was mainly on providing students with a line-by-line explanation of what a poem meant. In fact, the teachers confirmed that the main lesson gain for students was the ability to analyse poetry, so much so that the term 'poetry lesson' was considered synonymous with 'analysis'.

Some teachers relished the analysis of poetry and most of them implied that in class this was the only acceptable approach to poetry. As suggested above, this was partly due to their conception of poetry as a difficult genre that carried hidden meanings, which could only be unravelled via analysis. While the teachers protested against this conception of poetry when interviewed, they also seemed to share the belief that students' enjoyment of poetry was bound to a teacher's ability to make students understand it through explanation. In this, the participants seemingly subscribed to Kivy's (2011) idea that 'poetry is paraphrasable, which is to say, can be interpreted as to meaning, if meaning it has' (pp. 376–377). Such a thesis is refuted by Lamarque's (2009b) claim that 'Reading a poem *as poetry* demands the assumption of form-content unity' (p. 411).

The teachers' belief that, in reading poetry, content could be explained apart from form was probably what led them to identify with the approach to poetry described in the interview stimulus material, Billy Collins's (1988) 'Introduction to Poetry'. The teachers indicated that while they wanted to make students enjoy poetry they could not avoid being party to its 'torture'. Some of them blamed examination demands for this while a few admitted that their poetry lessons were too teacher-centred. With respect to the latter, the fact that they admitted this after reading Collins's poem might suggest that it made them reflect on their classroom practices or else that, while always conscious of their practices, they felt unwilling or helpless to effect change (Xerri, in press).

The emphasis placed on reading a poem for a specific meaning seemed to be also linked to the teachers' scepticism about the place of literary theory in the A-level poetry classroom, which they claimed to be motivated by their concerns about students' cognitive maturity as well as by some unease about their own ability to use literary theory for the purpose of teaching poetry (Xerri, 2013b). It was most likely that the teachers' avoidance of theory at A-level would lead their students to shrink away from theory once they were expected to engage with it as undergraduates.

### Teachers as gatekeepers to poetry

The study helps to show that the interplay between the teachers' beliefs and practices led them to consolidate their role as gatekeepers to poetry. One of the ways by which they positioned themselves as such was by controlling the choice of poems to be read in class. This was especially so in the case of literary criticism seminars given that choice was not determined by the syllabus or departmental procedures. For Connolly and Smith (2003), despite the fact that teachers cannot dispense with their authority due to their experience as readers, they can mitigate the effects of this authority by discovering a poem for the first time together with their students. This is in line with the idea that student engagement is more likely to occur if they are provided with an element of choice with respect to the texts read in class (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2006; Xerri, 2014). 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. The teachers in the study confirmed that they practically always chose the poems that were discussed in the seminars. In the observed lessons, teachers focused on poems that besides being highly canonical were also popular with syllabus and examination panels. These poems also happened to be written by some of the poets the teachers listed as their favourites, despite the admission on the part of most teachers that they did not read poetry for pleasure given its 'academic' connotations. Their failure to act as role models of enthusiastic readers in the poetry classroom probably helped to entrench the idea that poetry was solely an academic genre. Moreover, by controlling what kind of poetry students read in class, the teachers were positioning themselves as authoritative figures in relation to what poetry was worthy of lesson activities.

If a lesson's emphasis is primarily on helping students to understand a poem via explanation, teachers are enacting the role of gatekeepers to the text's meaning. This is even more so if teachers are reluctant to enable students to adopt a variety of critical lenses when reading a poem. Classroom observation confirmed that both the classroom layout and main lesson event helped to emphasise the power dynamic between teacher and students vis-à-vis the text's meaning. In most of the observed sessions, the line-by-line analysis of a poem was conducted exclusively by the teachers, who seemed to indicate that theirs was the only possible reading of the text. This contradicted the teachers' claim that during their

poetry lessons they sought to cultivate students' personal enrichment and that they encouraged students to share their personal response.

The teachers' belief that poetry possessed an element of difficulty made them value the act of explaining a poem to students in order for them to understand it. In the study, the way poetry was approached in class helped to galvanise the idea that every poem had a meaning and that students were meant to imitate teachers' way of 'torturing' out that meaning, especially because students were expected to do this in the examination (Xerri, 2013a). By adopting the stance of gatekeepers to poetry, some teachers probably helped to consolidate students' belief that a poem would remain inscrutable as long as a teacher was not present to help them unravel its meaning by means of a highly analytical approach.

## Conclusion

The effects of assessment on classroom practices in relation to poetry are still fundamental in the twenty-first century (Dymoke, 2003; Xerri, 2016b). However, as shown above, an equally significant factor is the contribution that teachers' beliefs about poetry have on the way they approach a poem in class. For this reason, teacher education and development should serve the purpose of enhancing teachers' beliefs and practices in relation to poetry, enabling them to see it as a multimodal genre that can be read in multiple ways and not solely in order to extract hidden meaning from a canonical poem for examination purposes. In this way they can influence their own students, who most often share their beliefs about poetry. Considering the nature and possible definitions of poetry is useful for both teachers and students (Stevens, 2001) given that it can lead to enhanced engagement in class (Pike, 2000). In fact, Fleming and Stevens (2015) consider it 'useful to examine the concept of "poetry", which may be a source of bewilderment or difficulty for pupils unless the term itself is subject to some discussion' (p. 182). The definition of what counts as poetry needs to be adequately ample so as to take into account as many different forms of poetry as possible and not just those typical of syllabi and examinations.

Moreover, teachers' beliefs should be revised in such a way that they come to see poetry as a democratic and inclusive genre, not just something produced by talented individuals who are 'born' poets. Teachers should be encouraged to see poetry as something that besides being read critically in class can also be read for pleasure. In fact, Borges (2000) believes that an exaggerated preoccupation with a poem's meaning diverts attention from the aesthetic qualities of poetry: 'I know for a fact that we *feel* the beauty of a poem before we even begin to think of a meaning' (p. 84). Teachers should not consider poetry to be the preserve of published poets but should conceive of it as something capable of being written by teachers and young people. In thinking and talking about poetry, teachers should emphasise its accessibility rather than its difficulty. They should be encouraged to challenge notions that help to mystify poetry and burden it with too much cachet (Xerri, 2016a). In this way they can allay students' anxiety in relation to poetry

and help them to view it as enjoyable. Most importantly, this would enable teachers to become aware of the powerful influence exerted by their beliefs on the way they approach poetry in class.

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