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When ‘home is the mouth of a shark’: understanding migration through the use of multicultural poetry

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Introduction

Anders Lustgarten’s (2015) play *Lampedusa* opens with a grim monologue by Stefano, whose job is to fish for the bodies of migrants who drown on their way to Europe from North Africa:

The bodies of the drowned are more varied than you’d think. Some are warped, rotted, bloated to three times their natural size, twisted into fantastical and disgusting shapes like the curse in that story my grandmother used to tell me. Dead of winter, chills down yer spine.

Others are calm, no signs of struggle, as if they’re dozing in the sun on a lazy summer afternoon and a tap on the arm will bring them gently awake. Those are the hardest. Because they’re the most human.

They’re overwhelmingly young, the dead. Twenties. Thirty at most. Kids, a lot of them. You have to be to make the journey, I suppose. (3–4)

By means of his play, Lustgarten (2015) hopes to initiate a conversation about a phenomenon that is not just affecting the Mediterranean region but is global in scope.

Over the past few years, migration due to persecution, conflict and human rights violations has increased exponentially. In 2015, more than 65 million people were forcibly displaced by such factors (UNHCR, 2016b). This record-high figure meant that 24 persons in every minute of 2015 were displaced from their homes. Young people constituted a large proportion of those who were displaced. In fact, more than half of the 21.3 million refugees in 2015 were people aged under 18, and around 98,000 asylum applications were lodged by unaccompanied or separated children (UNHCR, 2016b). This global phenomenon led Ban Ki Moon to affirm that: “We are facing the biggest refugee and displacement crisis of our time. Above all, this is not just a crisis of numbers; it is also a crisis of solidarity” (UNHCR, 2016b:5). His reference to solidarity is important given that its absence is likely to worsen the situation for all those people who are forcibly

displaced from their homes, sometimes having to travel huge distances in search of security, safety, stability and better prospects in foreign countries.

Ensuring that a sense of solidarity prevails among the citizens of these countries entails the harnessing of education for the nurturing of empathy and understanding in young people. According to Lustgarten (2015), “At the heart of our self-delusion about migration is a wilful misunderstanding of why people come” (iii). The use of multicultural poetry in the English language classroom can serve to foster empathy in young people and correct misunderstandings. Multicultural poetry consists of poems from various cultural groups. Xerri (2012:65) describes such poetry as being “typically associated with ethnic minorities and other socio-economically marginalized and under-represented groups. Usually their literature is as sidelined in the curriculum as it is in society.” This chapter illustrates how critical engagement with multicultural poetry can help to develop young people’s attitudes and beliefs in relation to migration so that they are able to display empathy and understanding.

Empathy through multicultural poetry

At a time when the world is afflicted by a variety of crises that run the risk of undermining civilization, there seems to be the need to reach global empathy as quickly as possible (Rifkin, 2009). Empathy is often termed a fundamental human value that needs to be enshrined in young people’s education. According to Kwek (2011), empathy consists of:

... being understanding of what other people need, and how the world is put together from a social and emotional point of view. These are important dispositions that align closely with 21st century skills, and move students toward deeper levels of engagement and understanding. (26)

In the education of 21st century global citizens, empathy is considered to be a key interpersonal competence (National Research Council, 2012). In fact, Reimers and Chung (as cited in Beasley Doyle,

2016) describe empathy as the ability to consider the complexity of issues in an interconnected worldview; by being rooted in tolerance and respect for others, empathy helps young people to transcend fragmentation.

However, many are becoming aware that it is increasingly difficult for empathy to thrive in present-day society. In fact, in an address to graduates in 2006, Barack Obama claimed that rather than the fiscal deficit “we should talk more about our empathy deficit – the ability to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes; to see the world through those who are different from us.” In his opinion, the older one gets the harder it becomes to cultivate empathy, especially since “we live in a culture that discourages empathy” (Obama, 2006). Finding ways of reducing the empathy deficit is crucial if we want young people to be well equipped for the demands of living and working in the 21st century. According to Krznaric (2014), one of the six habits of empathic individuals is that of transporting themselves into other people’s minds with the help of cultural and aesthetic creations. Poetry seems to be well suited for this function.

As argued by Xerri and Xerri Agius (2015), poetry can act as a significant means of consolidating empathy. This is because “poems form noteworthy juxtapositions between the readers’ world and the world created within the literary work” (Chavis, 2013:165). According to Williams (2011:17), “Poetry offers students the opportunity to increase their self-awareness by helping them examine their experiences in terms of emotions and mental images as well as language.” Through the reading of poetry, students develop empathic understanding; they “begin to see themselves and others, and themselves through others in a safe environment” (Williams, 2011:20). The use of poetry in the classroom bolsters young people’s empathy and thus enables them to embrace diversity.

The use of multicultural poetry in the English language classroom provides students with vicarious experiences that enable them to develop an appreciation of diversity and the difficult circumstances in other people’s lives (Xerri, 2012, 2015). This is because if the poem’s “speaker is someone very different from ourselves, we have the unique opportunity to enter privileged space and grow in our understanding of another’s struggles and triumphs” (Chavis, 2013:165). According to McCall (2004:176), “Poems make abstract issues of cultural diversity and racial, economic and gender injustices real. Poetry definitely offers rich learning opportunities.” For this reason, contemporary multicultural poetry can engage students with the diversity that ensues through migration and enable

them to develop cross-cultural understanding (Thomas and León, 2012). The importance of such understanding seems crucial in the attempt to consolidate their empathy.

Understanding migration through poetry

The German word *verstehen* is defined as empathic understanding, which entails the capacity to put oneself in someone else’s shoes in order to see things from their perspective and understand them better. Empathic understanding is something evoked by a number of contemporary multicultural poets, some of whom have written poetry that can help students to meaningfully engage with the global migration crisis and to develop an awareness of how this is connected to an absence of peace and stability in the world.

For example, in ‘Conversations About Home (at the Deportation Centre)’, the Somali-British poet Warsan Shire (2011:24) says that “No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.” The poem was written after Shire spent some time with refugees from Somalia, Eritrea, Congo and Sudan at the abandoned Somali embassy in Rome. In a later adaptation of the poem, Shire (2013:xi) addresses the reader directly and explains, “you have to understand, / that no one puts their children in a boat / unless the water is safer than the land.” This simple notion is at times difficult for some young people to understand when thinking about migration. The use of multicultural poetry enables them to critically engage with the issue and, in the process, they are likely to develop empathic understanding.

Shire’s sentiments about displacement soon became famous and her poem was quoted in an editorial (2015) on the migration crisis by *The New York Times*, and recited by Benedict Cumberbatch in the introduction to the re-release of the *Crowded House* (2015) single, *Help Is Coming*. According to Okeowo (2015), Shire:

embodies the kind of shape-shifting, culture-juggling spirit lurking in most people who can't trace their ancestors to their country's founding fathers, or whose ancestors look nothing like those fathers. In that limbo, Shire conjures up a new language for belonging and displacement.

Shire’s words have the potential to appeal not only to those people affected by migration, but also to young people in general. In fact, in 2013–14 Shire acted as the Young Poet Laureate for London, and in 2016 her poetry contributed to Beyoncé’s visual album *Lemonade*. Given the appeal of her poetry, and in an attempt to instigate empathic understanding on the part of my students in Malta, I chose to use

Shire's poetry (and that of other contemporary multicultural poets) in my English language lessons.

Societal and educational context

Malta is a small nation made up of an archipelago of islands in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. For many years, it has received asylum seekers from a number of war-torn sub-Saharan countries. The UNHCR (2016a) estimates that since 2002 around 19,000 people have crossed over to Malta by boat from North Africa. For a country with a population of only 423,000 people and an area of 316 square kilometres, this phenomenon has at times put a strain on its ability to come up with feasible solutions. Moreover, its social fabric has become far more multicultural, but this has not been to everyone's pleasure.

The students with whom I used multicultural poetry were aged 16 to 18 and studying English at a preparatory school for those planning to pursue undergraduate studies at university. Classes consisted of around 15 students who were largely first language speakers of Maltese. The students were mostly female and they were all of Maltese origin. However, the ethnic composition of the student population at the school was slowly becoming more diverse. My students were fairly used to reading poetry in English but this usually consisted of canonical poetry written by white Anglo-American poets from the 20th century and earlier. Their engagement with contemporary multicultural poetry was practically non-existent prior to the lessons outlined below.

Engaging with multicultural poetry

In my teaching I often seek to generate discussions about pressing societal, cultural and political issues, even though these might at times lead to the expression of passionate views on the part of my students. Since the start of my career, migration has been one of the most inflammatory topics to be discussed in the classroom. The exposure given to the issue in the media and in young people's homes and social circles has meant that students come to class with very strong views about migration, views that are not always of an altruistic nature. In certain cases, I have had students who were influenced by the bigoted and racist discourse outside the classroom. As shown by The Migration Observatory (2013), the way a country's discourse on migration is framed by the media tends to dehumanize migrants or depict them in terms of an illegal and massive problem. One way of countering such discourse is by focusing on migrants' own language, perhaps through poetry written by migrants. According to Ferguson (2014), "Poetry provides an accessible

exploration of the language of immigration through the eyes of people who have lived it." Dealing with certain entrenched attitudes and beliefs has at times been difficult for me, but I have found that the use of multicultural poetry in the English language classroom has been beneficial for my students.

Some of the poems I have used in my lessons include 'Home' by Warsan Shire, 'The Sea Migrations' by Caasha Lul Mohamud Yusuf, 'Emigrant' by Corsino Fortes, 'Illegal Immigrant' by Reza Mohammadi, 'The Boat that Brought Me Here' by Azita Ghahreman, and 'They'll Say, "She Must be From Another Country"' by Imtiaz Dharker. All of these poems have the potential to evoke students' empathy because they provide them with a perspective that they rarely get access to in the media or in discussions with friends and family. The poems encourage students to step into migrants' shoes or to see the issue through the eyes of those who are being discriminated against because they are perceived as different. Moreover, these poems help students to understand what migration is all about and why people choose to leave their homeland in order to seek a better life elsewhere. As Lustgarten (2015:iii) points out, "They don't come to soak the benefits system, because hardly any of them know it exists. They come out of desperation, because their country is on fire or their government is repressive or climate change is killing their crops." In addition, by engaging with such poems, students come to realise what role the Western world plays in the problem and how complacent or hostile attitudes in relation to migration will only lead to the persecution and death of more people. In fact, Chambers and Ianniciello (2016:48) argue that migration needs "to be understood as part of a wider, transnational history that is not separated out and rendered distant from our everyday life." Migration is not merely a socio-economic phenomenon, but it is intrinsically bound to globalization and the West's colonial history.

A lesson on migration

Shire's 'Home' was one of the first multicultural poems I used in a series of lessons on migration. I started by asking students to think about what home meant to them. Individually, students wrote down a personal definition of this construct and then they shared it with a partner. Some students referred to ideas like family, protection, identity, love and country. Then I asked them to reflect on some reasons for which they would decide to leave their home. Most students mentioned things like pursuing studies abroad and moving out of their parents' home.

By means of some images from Zammit Lupi's (2014) photographic art project *Islelanders*, I asked students

to consider other reasons why people might decide to leave their home. A few of them mentioned war or political instability in a country and these ideas led to a discussion of what happens when many people leave their homeland because of a crisis. Certain students expressed concerns about the effects of mass migration on the countries receiving migrants. They mentioned issues like overcrowding, loss of jobs, dilution of the national culture, and a higher incidence of crime and disease. It seemed evident that they perceived migration as largely negative and associated it with problems rather than benefits. Even though some students seemed to be aware that migrants usually leave their homeland to flee from war and other crises, others were under the impression that migration is mostly due to economic reasons.

I then showed students a video adaptation of Shire's 'Home' (<https://goo.gl/Dta2WW>) and asked them to list some of the reasons the poem's speaker mentions for leaving one's homeland. I played the video again so that they could confirm their answers in pairs. The majority of students quoted certain lines from the poem that they considered to be a powerful description of why people choose to escape from their countries. For example, students discussed the figurative language in the lines 'no one leaves home unless / home is the mouth of a shark', and 'no one leaves home unless home chases you'. In discussing the poem's language, I noticed that the students were deepening their understanding of the reasons for migration and the effects of the experience on those who are forced to undertake it.

Then I provided them with a printed copy of the poem, and in pairs students identified some of the negative attitudes and experiences that migrants are exposed to once they are pushed to journey to another country. In small groups, students discussed whether the migrants who come to Malta are subjected to these attitudes and experiences, and whether it was justified to treat them in this way. In their discussion, most students quoted lines and words from the poem to show that what Shire describes is very similar to what happens in their own country with respect to the reception of migrants. Some students were honest enough to admit that they tended to display such attitudes because of their misconceptions about migration.

In order to consolidate their understanding of the issues presented in Shire's poem, I asked students to watch the video again and compare the images and footage used in it to the language employed in the poem. Most students agreed that apart from the poet's recitation, the video did not capture the essence of the poem's language about migration. Hence, they worked in small groups in order to

storyboard part of the video. By means of this activity, students sought to visualise the circumstances that push people to flee their homes and the difficulties they experience once they migrate to another country.

The next stage of the lesson focused on the students' drafting of a poem inspired by Shire's 'Home'. The only constraints imposed on their creative efforts were the following: a) the poem had to begin with the line, 'no one leaves home unless home ...'; b) the poem had to be no longer than ten lines. Students planned the writing in class by considering what content to include, and what structure and figurative language to use. I provided them with feedback on each of these aspects of their poem, which they were then meant to complete at home. By writing their own poem about migration, students were prompted to voice their understanding of an event that despite affecting millions is always experienced on a personal level and can be highly traumatic if the individual is forcibly displaced from one's home.

By means of this lesson and others similar to it, I realised that multicultural poetry can lead to a development in students' attitudes and beliefs in relation to migration. By critically interrogating multicultural poems like 'Home', the uncharitable and narrow views of some students can be tempered by an increased awareness of what migration entails for those who are compelled to experience it and the complex reasons for which it occurs. A follow up to such lessons could be that of inviting students to make contact with migrants in their communities, compile oral histories and produce reflective journals, thus fortifying their comprehension of commonalities and transnational values (Ferguson, 2014).

Conclusion

As one of the most challenging phenomena facing many Western societies, migration is a contentious issue that at times leads to the manifestation of entrenched attitudes and beliefs on the part of a society's citizens. The discourse on migration that young people are sometimes exposed to might help to forge the way some of them feel and think about the issue. However, since poems can be used as a means of enhancing young people's sense of social justice (Ciardiello, 2010), when the poetry they read gives voice to migrants' experiences they are enabled to develop a richer and more humane view on migration. Once young people are provided with an opportunity to critically engage with multicultural poetry they are likely to re-evaluate any prejudiced attitudes and beliefs they might harbour. They come to see migration as driven by a need for security,

safety and stability, with tragic consequences for those who are forcibly displaced from their homes. In this sense, teachers of English can harness multicultural poetry in order to promote empathic understanding in their students. Multicultural poetry encourages students and teachers to use the classroom as a space where attitudes and beliefs in relation to migration are questioned and developed, and cultural fractures are healed.

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