

On Owing One's Poetic Life to Inspiring Teachers of English

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Introduction

In the final plenary at the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) 2015 Conference in Manchester, the poet laureate Dame Carol Ann Duffy preceded her reading of a selection of poems by speaking about the significance of teachers of English.

It's a privilege for me as a poet to be used by teachers in the classroom. I fell in love with poetry as an 11-year-old thanks to my teachers and I wouldn't have had my poetic life without my teachers.¹

Duffy was talking about her teachers Ms Scriven and Mr Walker, both of whom believed in her writing and guided her reading. When Ms Scriven passed away, Duffy celebrated her influence by means of the poem 'Death of a Teacher':

When I heard the hour – home time, last bell,
late afternoon – I closed my eyes. English, of course,
three decades back, and me thirteen. You sat on your desk,
swinging your legs, reading a poem by Yeats
to the bored girls, except my heart stumbled and blushed
as it fell in love with the words and I saw the tree
in the scratched old desk under my hands, heard the bird
in the oak outside scribble itself on the air.

In her plenary, Duffy established a direct relationship between the incipience of her passion for poetry and its powerful manifestation on the

part of her teachers. She used her own personal experience in order to underscore the value of inspiring teachers for promoting an enthusiasm for poetry reading and writing amongst young people. She seems to believe that without such teachers, poetry would find it hard to take root in the lives of future generations of readers and writers.

Poetry within the Factory Model

Duffy's conviction that inspiring teachers of poetry are an absolute necessity is given more weight when one considers the current educational climate in various contexts around the world. This seems to be a time in which it is increasingly apparent that education is being tasked with little else apart from equipping men and women with the knowledge and skills needed in the workplace. Education is perceived as the hothouse in which a country's workforce develops the necessary competences to contribute to the growth of its economy and competitiveness. Hence, school subjects need to fulfil a utilitarian function and the curriculum needs to prioritise learning that translates into skills that can be transferred to the workplace.

If schools are factories producing only implements that serve a practical purpose, educators are robots that build these automata. In the factory model of education there is no place for the amorphousness of creativity; there is no place for freethinkers amongst teachers and learners; and there is no place for subjects and materials that lack the potential for the incisiveness of a utilitarian purpose. As Richert, Geiser and Donahue point out, 'Within the factory model, certain people, ideas, capabilities and talents fall by the wayside.'³ Duffy's 'Education for Leisure' suggests some of the dangers of such a reductionist approach to education. The poem was on the GCSE syllabus until AQA ordered schools to pulp the anthology containing the poem due to complaints that it incited knife crime.⁴ In the poem, an alienated and discontented youth is seduced by violence whilst on the dole. Deluded by the belief that he or she is a genius, the speaker feels disgruntled at being unnoticed and decides to commit murder as a means of changing the world.

Today I am going to kill something. Anything.
I have had enough of being ignored and today
I am going to play God. It is an ordinary day,
a sort of grey with boredom stirring in the streets.

I squash a fly against the window with my thumb.
We did that at school. Shakespeare. It was in
another language and now the fly is in another language.
I breathe out talent on the glass to write my name.⁵

The poem's speaker seems to be someone who cannot find a creative outlet for his or her talents, someone uneducated in how to operate effectively outside the workplace. In her essay 'The Rise and Fall of "Education for Leisure"', Gershon argues that 'For centuries, formal education was for the young people who would grow up not to work for a paycheck, but to shape societies and to appreciate the best things their cultures had to offer.'⁶ However, once the focus of education shifted to educating the future workforce, young people's creative and cultural life stopped being a priority with the consequence that studying a language is primarily valued for its sense of utility rather than its potential for creative expressivity.

The factory model considers language learning to be essential, but only for the purpose of easing commerce and trade, facilitating productivity in the workplace, enabling clear communication amongst employees and business partners, and enhancing efficiency on the part of everyone involved. Language learning is considered a catalyst for improved results, higher profit margins, and smoother operations. If school is the factory where future regiments of automata are programmed and assembled to operate efficiently in other factory contexts then language learning needs to limit itself to fostering only those outputs that are deemed desirable on the part of these automatons. Language learning is thus only a means to an end and the teacher is duty bound to engage learners in activities and with materials that maximise the attainment of this objective.

In the factory model of education, poetry and its enthusiasts have little value. If given any space at all, it is only within the bounds of a poetry pedagogy that instructs young people to spot figurative devices in poems and respond to them in the restricted ways leading to examination success. In such a model, teachers and learners come to perceive poetry as a genre studied only because of the cachet it has developed over the course of literary history. Poetry is either read through the critical lens provided by authoritative readers or else for the purpose of language learning. Poetry is not engaged with for poetry's sake.

Beliefs, Attitudes and Practices

Some teachers of English consider themselves burdened with the onus of teaching poetry because it features in the curriculum.⁷ They might feel uncomfortable positioning themselves as teachers of poetry because they do not read or write poetry themselves.⁸ Poetry is what poets do, not teachers and learners. Other teachers of English use poetry in their lessons even if not expected to by the curriculum but most often they do so as a conduit for language teaching, perceiving poetry as a means to an end and not as something worth engaging with for its inherent value.

Such beliefs and attitudes in relation to poetry inevitably rub off on students and affect their approach toward the genre.⁹ They hinder them from seeing their teachers as role models of the kind of enthusiastic readers and writers of poetry that would impel them to conceive of the genre as one to be engaged with outside the classroom. Hence, poetry remains just something to be read at school for critical purposes or else exploited in language learning activities. Learners fail to think of poetry as something to be read and written for its intrinsic joy. It is as if there is always an ulterior purpose to the use of poetry in the classroom. This impedes poetry from becoming part of learners' lives outside the classroom.

The Poetic Life

Duffy was very blunt about the power of education when she ascribed the origins of her poetic life to inspiring teachers. From a young girl who one day was stimulated to discover the beauty and truth of poetry, she became someone who writes poems, publishes poetry collections, occupies a place on syllabuses and study course programmes, acts as the poet laureate, works as a professor of contemporary poetry, and recites poetry at events all over the world. Her poetic life is rich and varied. Very few people achieve a fraction of Duffy's poetic success. If good poetry is the result of a combination of natural talent and carefully cultivated skills then one must admit that Duffy possesses both in prodigious amounts.

Nonetheless, a poetic life is not the sole preserve of a successful poet like Duffy. The most valuable element in her poetic life is the proclivity to read and write poetry. This is something that education can foster in all young people. However, for this to happen learners cannot be perceived as automatons in whom utilitarian knowledge and skills need to be implanted at the expense of the cultivation of creativity. Young people can be inspired to develop their own poetic life by being provided with plenty of opportunities to read poetry for pleasure, rather than only for

critical purposes or as a means of improving their linguistic proficiency. Their poetic life can flourish if they are inspired to write poetry as a means of expressing their personal thoughts and emotions, reflections and observations, rather than only as a means of doing another kind of writing practice activity. Young people's poetic life can be sustained beyond the classroom and beyond their school years if the reading and writing of poetry become an intrinsic part of how they derive pleasure and express their identity.

Duffy associates the origins of the poetic life with inspiring teachers. Perhaps this means that in order for young people to develop a poetic life they must have access to such teachers. However, while Duffy was lucky enough to have such teachers the opportunity of pursuing a poetic life should not be down to luck alone. If it is desirable for young people to develop a poetic life then it is imperative that teachers benefit from the possibility of developing one for themselves. This might mean providing teachers with support in order not to balk at positioning themselves as readers and writers of poetry. It might involve developing their beliefs and attitudes in relation to poetry so that they come to perceive it as more inclusive in terms of how it can be approached, and more democratic in terms of who can read it and write it. Effecting a change in teachers' beliefs and attitudes might lead to a change in practices, but this needs to be complemented by changes at a curricular and assessment level. In some contexts, poetry might have to be pushed off its pedestal so that it ceases to be venerated as a genre to be studied and assessed solely in critical ways. In other contexts, poetry might have to start being seen as an end in itself and not just as a vehicle for language learning purposes. While engaging with poetry for critical or language learning purposes remains valid and desirable, it is crucial that those should not constitute its sole ambit.

Conclusion

Young people are entitled to a poetic life just as they are entitled to a life characterised by other forms of creativity. However, if their poetic life is to be sown at school, the educational climate needs to change. They should not be perceived as attending school in order for them to be treated like automatons constructed by teachers in such a way that they will operate efficiently once they reach the end of the assembly line. The knowledge and skills needed for utilitarian purposes should not exercise a stranglehold over the poetic and broader creative propensities of young people. These should be nurtured to the fullest extent and valued as a significant way of enriching the social sphere.

If Duffy's faith in inspiring teachers of English is legitimate then they should be enabled to kindle such inspiration. This might necessitate a change in teacher education and development practices.¹¹ The emphasis placed on teachers' own creativity should be far weightier and their poetic lives cultivated by means of opportunities that encourage them to position themselves as readers and writers of poetry. If Duffy is right in thinking that enthusiasm for poetry is infectious, teachers need to first contract the poetry bug. It is in this way that future generations of learners can owe their poetic lives to inspiring teachers of English.

Notes

1. Carol Ann Duffy, 'A Poetry Reading', 14 April 2015, 49th International IATEFL Conference and Exhibition, Manchester.
2. Carol Ann Duffy, 'What Made You Become a Poet?', *Sheer Poetry*, <http://www.sheerpoetry.co.uk/gcse/faq/faq-carol-ann-duffy/what-made-you-become-a-poet> [Last accessed 18 April 2015].
3. Anna Ershler Richert, Kristin Donaldson Geiser and David M. Donahue, (2000). 'Secondary School: A Tense Stasis in Function and Form', in *Routledge International Companion to Education*, ed. by Ben-Miriam Peretz, Sally Brown and Bob Moon (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 621-641 (p. 628).
4. Polly Curtis, 'Top Exam Board Asks Schools to Destroy Book Containing Knife Poem', *The Guardian*, 4 September 2008, <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2008/sep/04/gcse.english> [Last accessed 18 April 2015].
5. Carol Ann Duffy, 'Education for Leisure', in *Standing Female Nude* (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1985).
6. Livia Gershon, 'The Rise and Fall of "Education for Leisure"', *JSTOR Daily*, 3 December 2014, <http://daily.jstor.org/rise-fall-education-leisure> [Last accessed 18 April 2015].
7. Daniel Xerri, "'Poetry is a Tremendous Ally": Children's Poet Michael Rosen on Teachers' Attitudes towards Poetry', *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 20 (2014), 112-122.
8. Daniel Xerri, 'Poetry Writing in the Post-16 English Curriculum', *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 12 (2013), 140-155.
9. Daniel Xerri, 'Colluding in the "Torture" of Poetry: Shared Beliefs and Assessment', *English in Education*, 47 (2013), 134-146.
10. Daniel Xerri, 'English Teachers Positioning Themselves as Poets', *The ETAS Journal*, 32 (2014), 25-27.
11. Daniel Xerri, 'The Value of Creativity: Language Teachers as Creative Practitioners', *Teaching English*, 3 (2013), 23-25.