

Appendix 6: A Teacher's Experiences Highlighted by a Stimulus Poem

Daniel Xerri's vignette

Daniel's context

The extract below is from a semi-structured interview I held with a teacher of English, F, at a post-16 college in Malta. It formed part of a pilot study and was the first time I was trialling the interview guide. The interview was conducted in a one-to-one manner and lasted about 45 minutes. It took place after I had observed the teacher delivering a 55-minute poetry lesson to a class of 14 students studying English at Advanced Level and who were about to sit for their examination in less than six months' time. The teacher had 12 years' teaching experience and held a Master's degree in English Literature. I conducted classroom observation by means of an events checklist using interval recording. The purpose of the interview was to explore the teacher's beliefs and practices in relation to poetry teaching.

Towards the end of the interview, stimulus material was used to allow the teacher to elaborate further on her experiences as a teacher of poetry. The stimulus consisted of the poem 'Introduction to Poetry' by Billy Collins (1988). When poetry is used in qualitative research it has the potential 'to communicate findings in multidimensional, penetrating, and more accessible ways' (Cahnmann, 2003, p. 35). I realised that by incorporating a question on a poem in the interview guide I could better understand 'the richness and complexity of the observed world' (Cahnmann, 2003, p. 34). I chose this poem partly because of what Collins (2003) says about poetry and school: 'all too often it is the place where poetry goes to die' (p. xvii). By means of Collins's (1988) poem I wanted the interviewee to provide me with more than her reading of the poem; I was mostly interested in what she thought it said about her teaching experience.

Daniel's interview extract

- D: the last thing that I'd like you to do is (.) could you read this poem and keeping in mind what we've been discussing tell me whether it describes your experience during a poetry lesson?
- F: ((reads poem)) oh well (.) I love the first part (.) the final two stanzas I don't know whether you'd agree with me but they seem to be referring to secondary school students rather than sixth formers (.) to be honest when I taught in secondary school I found that attitude (.) you know? miss what does it mean? A Level second year students don't always give you this response do they? I mean the curious ones don't want the teacher to give her own definition her own interpretation for them to write down (.) this is a feeling I definitely used to get when I taught poetry in secondary schools (.) miss tell us what it means so that we can put

it down (.) they don't look at the poem but they look at you and they want to memorise what you are saying so that they can go and write it in the exam

D: but why does this attitude suddenly change once they enter sixth form?

F: well I'm lucky I must say because my second year A Level students come to class with a certain curiosity and I think that curiosity is essential (.) I think you always have five to six students who are there to memorise what you're saying so that they can go and replicate it in the exam irrespective of whether it fits the question or not (.) I mean you always get them (.) I mean even at the end of the year you occasionally get students who give you back what you would have given them irrespective of whether it fits the context (.) the reason why it changes at sixth form is perhaps because at sixth form they are conscious that they are studying the subject because they want to (.) whereas even when I used to teach in what is perhaps the best girls' junior lyceum in Malta you had about 30% of the class who hated the fact that they had to study literature that (.) they were forced to do so (.) with A Level students if the teacher is sly enough to choose texts which interest the students which aren't very conformist (.) for example you noticed when you observed the lesson (.) I took those texts because you were coming because I wasn't planning on doing those texts but I said let me do them because I want to be a little interactive and I want to give them an opportunity to speak on their own (.) the number of students who objected to the Wordsworth text and said that it's so conformist and it's so mellifluous and silly which it is from a certain point of view (.) you know (.) they were put off (.) they wanted to resist the text (.) when I've chosen texts which have been a little less conformist I think that that tends to involve them a bit more

Interviewer reflection on extract

I decided to use stimulus material as part of my semi-structured interview with this teacher because I wanted 'to generate less analytical and more imaginative responses' (Morgan, Fellows, & Guevara, 2008, p. 198). The stimulus material was meant to provide me with a form of unstructured response that distilled all that had taken place in the observed lesson and all that we had discussed in the interview. I chose Collins's poem in order to provide the teacher with a final opportunity to reflect on her experiences in relation to the topic of the interview, that is, the teaching of poetry.

The poem served as a means by which the teacher could think about her experiences and decide whether the situation described in Collins's poem was

similar to or different from her own. Thanks to the stimulus material she could contrast her present teaching situation with past contexts and explain to me why she considered them to be different. This allowed me to realise that the stimulus material served as a medium through which the teacher could identify with some experiences while distancing herself from others. The teacher was aware of differences in students' attitudes to poetry depending on the context in which they were being taught. This awareness on her part meant that her own pedagogy might have had to adjust itself to students' expectations of her and their approach to poetry. By piloting the stimulus material with this particular teacher I realised that in future interviews I would need to ask many other probing questions in order to plumb teachers' views about why they identify with or dissociate themselves from the situation described in the poem. This would enable me to use the instrument more effectively and thus develop an understanding of teachers' beliefs about poetry teaching and how these influence their practice.

Given that the interview took place soon after I had observed one of the teacher's lessons, the stimulus material helped her to keep in mind the events in that particular lesson, her behaviour and that of her students. The events checklist indicated that the most frequent event during the observed lesson was that of the teacher explaining something in relation to poetry. The teacher's explanations slackened in frequency only when the students were working in small groups. Group work was present for almost one third of the lesson. While discussing the stimulus material the teacher mentioned that these group work activities were purposefully devised for my visit and this made me aware of the possibility that what I had witnessed was an example of the Hawthorne effect. I realised that in future interviews I had to address this issue by questioning each observed teacher about the reasons for certain teaching decisions. This would enable me to ascertain whether these decisions were typical of their style of teaching or a result of reactivity.

Using stimulus material as part of the interview confirmed that the instrument would allow me to answer my research questions. However, in the process I was also able to reflect on my own shortcomings as an interviewer, especially in light of the fact that a lack of experience may lead one not to ask probing questions (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, p. 394). Analysing the transcript made me fully embrace the notion that an interview 'allows for greater depth than is the case with other methods of data collection' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 352). I learnt that this is even more so when stimulus material is built into the interview guide. However, the stimulus material also highlighted the possibility of reactivity during classroom observation and this problem was compounded by the fact that my very choice of stimulus material exemplified my own beliefs as a researcher. I was subsequently reassured by the idea that while 'we cannot eliminate researcher bias or the influence of researchers on participants and settings... we can openly acknowledge that bias in our interpretations and writing' (Casanave, 2010, p. 73). Using stimulus material as part of the interview facilitated the process of gathering rich data but also served to flag a number of areas that required further development in order for me to use this instrument in a more effective manner.

daniel.xerri@um.edu.mt

References

- Cahnmann, M. (2003). The craft, practice, and possibility of poetry in educational research. *Educational Researcher*, 32(3), 29–36.
- Casanave, C.P. (2010). Case studies. In B. Paltridge & A. Phakiti (Eds.), *Continuum companion to research methods in applied linguistics* (pp. 66–79). London: Continuum.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education* (6th ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Collins, B. (1988). Introduction to poetry. *The apple that astonished Paris*, 58. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press.
- Collins, B. (Ed.). (2003). *Poetry 180: A turning back to poetry*. New York: Random House.
- Morgan, D., Fellows, C., & Guevara, H. (2008). Emergent approaches to focus group research. In S.N. Hesse-Biber & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Handbook of emergent methods* (pp. 189–205). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Northcutt, N., & McCoy, D. (2004). *Interactive qualitative analysis: A systems method for qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.