

‘We Need to Demystify Poetry’: An Interview with David Musgrave

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Abstract: This article explores the views of the contemporary Australian poet and publisher David Musgrave. Based on an interview conducted in Sydney, it examines Musgrave’s thoughts on poetry education and the status of the genre in the present social, cultural, and educational milieu. His experiences as a poet, small press publisher of poetry, and poetry educator serve to illuminate his discussion of the writing, promotion, and teaching of poetry in Australia and beyond. His views resonate with other poets and teachers working in diverse contexts.

Keywords: poetry education, Australia, publishing, teacher education

On a research trip to Australia, I had the opportunity of interviewing a number of stakeholders involved in poetry education. One of the people I interviewed was David Musgrave, an award-winning poet with five collections to his name. He is considered to be ‘a formally inventive poet’ whose ‘poetry moves restlessly between formality and informality, between the serious and the comic, and between the romantic and the ironic’.¹ Musgrave is described as employing ‘wryness and precision’ in order to write ‘long, formally complex poems that use human relationships, personal and literary history, and observations of the natural world’.² In 2016 he published a book-length poem entitled *Anatomy of Voice*.³ I met Musgrave at the University of Sydney, this having been the institution

1 The Poetry Archive, <<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/david-musgrave>>.

2 Poetry Foundation, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/david-musgrave#poet>>.

3 D. Musgrave, *The Anatomy of Voice* (Melbourne, 2016).

where he completed a PhD in Menippean satire in 1997.⁴ Besides writing poetry, Musgrave teaches creative writing at undergraduate and postgraduate levels at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales. He is also the founder of Puncher & Wattmann, a small independent publisher specialising in poetry but also occasionally producing novels, literary criticism, and other books by Australian authors.⁵

The interview, presented verbatim below, taps into Musgrave's views as a poet, educator and publisher. It is one of a series of interviews on poetry education I have conducted with poets in the UK, Australia, and the USA over the past few years. A number of interview-based articles such as this one have been published in refereed journals or are in the process of being published.⁶ One of the aims of these articles is to provide poets with a means of weighing in on the poetry education debate and thus enrich the existent literature, from which their voices are usually absent.

Poetry Education

Like many poets, Musgrave fervently believes in the inherent value of poetry. In fact he claims that

Poetry offers people a way of discovering new ideas, of giving expression to things that otherwise can't be expressed... If our understanding of the world consisted entirely of science and popular culture, it doesn't seem to me we would necessarily be able to think of new ways to perceive things or do things in non-rational ways. And most people would admit that, without that aspect, they would feel impoverished.⁷

4 See id., *Grotesque Anatomies: Menippean Satire since the Renaissance* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2014).

5 Puncher & Wattmann's website is <www.puncherandwattmann.com>.

6 See the following publications: D. Xerri, 'Poetry on the Subway: An Interview with Children's Poet John Rice', *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 18 (2012), 105–15; id., 'Schools as "Poetry-friendly Places": Michael Rosen on Poetry in the Curriculum', *Arts Education Policy Review*, 115 (2014), 151–8; id., "'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), 112–22; id., "'Poetry Does Really Educate': An Interview with Spoken Word Poet Luka Lesson", *English in Australia*, 51 (2016), 18–24.

7 University of Newcastle, 'Poetry in Motion', <<https://www.newcastle.edu.au/profile/david-musgrave#highlights>>.

For Musgrave, poetry is an important means of human expression that has the potential to enrich people’s personal and social life. Given the threats to poetry declaimed by many,⁸ Musgrave is someone who champions poetry’s cause and seeks to make it an intrinsic part of the cultural fabric of the context he works in. In fact, one of the reasons why he founded Puncher & Wattmann is that he wanted poetry to remain available in contemporary culture, given the decision taken by some publishers to reduce or discontinue their poetry lists. As an educator, he seeks to nurture young people’s ability to read and write poetry because of his conviction that it provides the individual with a powerful medium of self-expression. This is further underscored by his long-standing involvement in Australian Poetry, an organization ‘deeply committed to the art of poetry, to what poetry can do, what Australian poets and their poetry can do’.⁹ Through its national artistic and professional development programmes it seeks to help young people grow as poets. In fact, its vision statement affirms that ‘Poetry helps people live better, as art does; it brings meaning and insight to the spectrum of life’s experiences, as art does; it is a play with language which is unique, riveting, disruptive and sometimes epiphanic.’¹⁰ From the interview it becomes clear that Musgrave believes in the significance of consolidating poetry’s presence in young people’s education, partly through the provision of enhanced support for teachers. His views are largely in line with what the international research literature on poetry education says.

While Musgrave suggests that poetry is not in decline in terms of book sales and the number of poets writing, he complains that in schools poetry tends to be considered as something canonical. Hence, it is mostly well-established poets from past eras that make it into the curriculum, with only a sprinkling of contemporary poetry featuring in young people’s reading at school. For example, from its inception A-level English Literature in the UK ‘was criticized by both school and university teachers for its narrow focus on the close reading of a small number of traditional canonical set texts informed by an essentially

8 For a review of the many commentators who have written about the supposed poetry crisis see D. Xerri, “‘Living in a House without Mirrors’”: Poetry’s Cachet and Student Engagement’, *Anglica: An International Journal of English Studies*, 25 (2016), 271–86.

9 Australian Poetry, <<http://www.australianpoetry.org/our-vision/>>.

10 Ibid.

Leavisite paradigm'.¹¹ Research indicates that the curriculum should deter teachers from focusing exclusively on canonical poems or bequeathing onto students a reverential attitude towards poetry. The fact that students 'are still commonly introduced to poetry as something which is to be intoned reverentially or read in silence' means that they 'view canonical literature as something which is inaccessible and irrelevant to them'.¹² Contemporary poetry should be taught more regularly in order 'to explore and celebrate the languages and voices of one's times'.¹³ As a publisher of emerging poets and a contemporary poet himself, Musgrave believes that contemporary poetry should be given more prominence in the curriculum.

Musgrave laments the curtailing of poet-in-residence programmes, which to a large extent have been shown to be rewarding for students, despite the fact that benefits are harder to achieve in secondary schools due to curricular and assessment pressures.¹⁴ He feels that for many people poetry is a fringe activity and schools should do more to change this perception and get more students to engage with poetry. One means by which this can be achieved is through teacher engagement with poetry. According to the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) in the UK, poet residencies are truly successful when they act as a form of in-service training for teachers, allowing them to develop as writers.¹⁵ Workshops led by published poets help teachers to broaden their awareness of a range of innovative methods that can be used in a poetry lesson: 'The poets inspire, encourage, and support teachers to write poetry as well as read it themselves.'¹⁶ Musgrave is convinced of the need to help teachers to become passionate about poetry and to train them to read it and teach it more effectively.

Besides the knowledge and skills required in order to read and teach poetry, Musgrave also suggests that teachers require training aimed at

11 G. Snapper, 'Beyond Curriculum 2000: Some National and International Perspectives on A Level English Literature', *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 14 (2007), 17.

12 H. Gregory, 'Youth Take the Lead: Digital Poetry and the Next Generation', *English in Education*, 47 (2013), 120.

13 J. Retallack and J. Spahr (eds.), *Poetry and Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary* (New York and Basingstoke, 2006), 11.

14 N. Owen and P. Munden, *Class Writing: A NAWE Research Report into the Writers-in-schools Ecology* (York, 2010).

15 Ibid.

16 K. Smith, 'Taking the Fear Out of Teaching Poetry', *Nate Classroom*, 4 (2008, February), 8.

challenging the belief that poetry is something enigmatic which needs to be decoded. ‘The notion of poetry as a puzzle’¹⁷ is most often inherited by students, who end up seeing poetry as something to be unravelled. In fact, Snapper remarks that ‘Often students come to A Level – and leave A Level – seeing poems as irritating little verbal puzzles set to test them in exams, to see whether they can get the right answer.’¹⁸ Musgrave believes that in primary schools, children need to be encouraged to develop a positive attitude towards poetry by coming to see it as something they can read for fun. In secondary schools, teachers need to be provided with suitable resources that amplify their understanding of what constitutes poetry and how it works. In this way poetry can be demystified for both teachers and students. This is significant because out of all the different text types that teachers are expected to teach, ‘poetry is the one which seems to present the most people with the most challenges’.¹⁹ Xerri argues that ‘Demystifying poetry is crucial if students are to see poetry as something accessible and enjoyable, something they can read on their own without the teacher acting as a gatekeeper to meaning.’²⁰ Musgrave seems to indicate that teacher training and resources can be harnessed to broaden both teachers’ and students’ conceptions of poetry.

According to Musgrave, poetry writing is important because it provides young people with a way of expressing themselves and of engaging with language. The Poetry Trust, a UK organization founded by poets for the purpose of poetry promotion and talent development, states that through poetry writing young people ‘may gain an understanding of the way words can carry complex and subtle meanings and experience the exhilaration and pleasure there is in stitching words together’.²¹ In his poetry-writing workshops, Musgrave helps young people to develop critical distance from the poems they write. In this way they come to appreciate the feedback that he as a teacher gives them and the multiple readings that every poem is capable of. They are

- 17 S. Dymoke, *Drafting and Assessing Poetry: A Guide for Teachers* (London, 2003), 3.
- 18 G. Snapper, ‘Beyond *Dead Poets Society*: Developing Literary Awareness at A Level’, *English Drama Media*, 6 (2006), 32.
- 19 S. Dymoke, *Teaching English Texts 11–18* (London, 2009), 71.
- 20 D. Xerri, ‘Colluding in the “Torture” of Poetry: Shared Beliefs and Assessment’, *English in Education*, 47 (2013), 135.
- 21 The Poetry Trust, *The Poetry Toolkit: Foolproof Recipes for Teaching Poetry in the Classroom* (Halesworth, 2010), 1.

also likely to stop seeing poetry as being way too intimate for anyone else to fully understand it apart from the poet.

In terms of the teaching of poetry, Musgrave complains about the lack of attention given to a poem's aesthetic qualities, especially its use of rhythm and sound. Pedagogy should not be restricted to helping students understand a poem's meaning but should capitalize on poetry's creative use of language. As Barrs and Styles remind us, 'the teaching of poetry needs always to keep in touch with the sensual aesthetic qualities of poetry ... We all need to be re-connected, all the time, to the basics of poetry – sound, rhythm, pattern, music, play, and pleasure.'²² Snapper 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.'²³ For Musgrave, effective poetry pedagogy puts a premium on the aesthetic qualities of a poem.

One of the main problems Musgrave encounters when teaching creative writing is that too many people are interested in writing poetry without bothering to read enough of it. He feels that pre- and in-service teacher education should be harnessed in order to enable classroom practitioners to position themselves as readers and writers of poetry. It should also serve to provide teachers with the necessary knowledge of poetry and pedagogical competence so that they would be able to teach poetry as effectively as a poet, if not more. For NAWE, 'It is increasingly clear that creative writing is best nurtured in the classroom by teachers who are willing to engage with writing themselves – indeed who see themselves as practising writers.'²⁴ Musgrave suggests that teachers and poets should partner together in order to enhance young people's poetry-learning experience.

The below interview with Musgrave highlights some of the concerns of poets and educators worldwide, most of whom share the belief that 'there has been a woeful neglect of the enormous contribution poetry can make to young people's knowledge and intellectual development'.²⁵ The

22 M. Barrs and M. Styles, 'Afterword', in *Making Poetry Matter: International Research on Poetry Pedagogy*, ed. by S. Dymoke, A. Lambirth, and A. Wilson (London and New York, 2013), 191.

23 G. Snapper, 'Exploring Resistance to Poetry in Advanced English Studies', in Dymoke, Lambirth, and Wilson, 40.

24 NAWE, 'Teachers as Writers' (2010) <<http://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/writers-in-schools/teachers-as-writers.html>>.

25 Dymoke, Lambirth, and Wilson, 'Introduction', in Dymoke, Lambirth, and Wilson, 1.

status accorded to poetry in the curriculum plays a role in determining the value it is given by young people. It can be argued that ‘unless education systems expose students to the study of poetry in depth, it is a value that eludes or escapes most, unnoticed, and unmissed’; the main consequence being that in the long run such ‘pedagogical bypassing becomes profoundly entrenched’.²⁶ For example, Dymoke affirms that in New Zealand and England ‘poetry could be seen as an increasingly unfamiliar text’²⁷ for young people. Just like Musgrave, many contemporary poets are aware of this sad state of affairs and hope that poetry education will bolster its role in ensuring that children’s creative engagement with poetry is not further impoverished.

The Interview

DX: Tell me a bit about yourself as a poet, an academic who is interested in poetry, and also a publisher of poetry. It’s a very interesting combination.

DM: I started publishing poetry when I was 19. At this university [Sydney] I won all the undergraduate prizes that were available, some of them a number of times. Academically, I wasn’t interested in poetry at first. I did a PhD in satire. So for me poetry has always been an artistic pursuit. I’m interested in the theoretical concerns that would characterize most modern poetics and I try to follow that aspect, but I’ve only recently started publishing on poetry as an academic subject. I have written about poetry but from the perspective of satire. I’ve published five books of poetry and one CD [*Open Water*],²⁸ and my poems are on the Poetry Foundation website. I’ve a little bit of an international presence, having had poetry published in *The New Yorker*²⁹ and a new

- 26 M. Weaven and T. Clark, ‘Evolution and Contingency: Poetry, Curriculum and Culture in Victoria, Australia’, *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education*, 18 (2011), 83.
- 27 S. Dymoke, ‘Poetry is an Unfamiliar Text: Locating Poetry in Secondary English Classrooms in New Zealand and England during a Period of Curriculum Change’, *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education*, 19 (2012), 408.
- 28 D. Musgrave, *Open Water* (Split Junction, 2007).
- 29 Id., ‘On the Inevitable Decline into Mediocrity of the Popular Musician Who Attains a Comfortable Middle Age’, *The New Yorker* (30 August 2010) <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/08/30/on-the-inevitable-decline-into-mediocrity-of-the-popular-musician-who-attains-a-comfortable-middle-age>>.

and selected edition of my poetry has come out in London.³⁰ I've won a few major prizes here in Australia. Factually, that's where I am as a poet. As a publisher, I started my press in 2005. The reason why I started was that it had always been something I wanted to do. I didn't necessarily have the motivation or resources to do it. A good friend of mine had a book scheduled to be published by a press in 2005 but the press folded. That was part of the bigger story. From 1995 to 2005 was a period of great transition in poetry publishing in Australia, the UK, and possibly the USA. Presses like Oxford University Press, Heinemann, Penguin, and Harper Collins decided to drop their poetry lists. Harper Collins was particularly significant because it had a very famous Australian imprint called Angus and Robertson that became moribund. It was the canonical imprint; these days its equivalent is Faber and Faber. The consequence of this was that established poets who had two or three books with these presses had to go to smaller presses, which had normally been the reserve of younger poets coming through. So in that period it was virtually impossible for an emerging poet to get a book published unless they had significant political influence. I experienced what that was like at first hand and I didn't really want it to happen to another poet. So I started Puncher & Wattmann for that reason and also because I wanted to help my friend. It's just snowballed; it's been very successful. I've published more than 75 poetry collections. This is probably arguable but I think it's the major poetry publisher in Australia for a number of reasons. We've had one book in every three shortlisted for a major prize. We don't necessarily win them but we're shortlisted. These prizes are all political anyway. We've got several of the leading Australian poets in our list. We've also published seven anthologies, including an historical Australian anthology, a women's poetry one, a gay and lesbian one, an anthology of poems on Sydney, and an Asian Australian anthology. There are other anthologies in the pipeline. Our commitment to Australian poetry is total. We also publish other things and our influence is significant in several areas, not necessarily in terms of poetics but in terms of trying to break down the polarities in Australian poetry between left and right. We publish people from both sides. We don't play that political game, or at least we try to play a third force political game.

30 Id., *Selected Poems* (London, 2014).

DX: You’ve been a publisher of poetry since 2005. How old were you at the time?

DM: I had just turned 40.

DX: Were you new to the publishing industry?

DM: Yes. I mean I’d worked on undergraduate journals at this university [Sydney] and I ran a small underground journal for a while. It was lots of fun to do. But yes, I spent six months acquiring the knowledge needed to run a press.

DX: Is it part of your mission to publish emerging poets?

DM: Absolutely! From early on I was very much aware that people like me – poets worth publishing – were not being published. There were several reasons for this. Probably the biggest reason that I could see was that people didn’t fit into an appropriate political formation. So early on, I was interested in publishing people who had been sidelined as well as new poets. If I look at all the careers I’ve launched, it’s quite a lot.

DX: Now let me ask you some questions on poetry education. Some people have voiced concern about the status of poetry in contemporary culture. They maintain that poetry is experiencing a crisis and that its readership is in decline. From your experience as a publisher, as someone who teaches at university and as a poet, do you consider such sentiments to be valid?

DM: Yes and no. As a publisher I’ve noticed in ten years that the market has declined across the board. Whether that’s across as in poetry or as in book publishing is a moot point. I suspect the latter rather than the former. We think of poetry as being in crisis because we consider our parents’ or our grandparents’ generations to have used poetry as a pedagogical tool for memory. Most people of those generations could recite poetry by heart. Poetry was popular and it was published quite a lot. Many people wrote it. Whether that means it was an art form is another point altogether. Because it could be that people wrote poetry for various reasons. It was a game that was expected, such as in Imperial Japan where people at court wrote poetry for each other. Certainly, poetry as an art form is not in decline; there’s no doubt about that, to me. The number of practitioners in Australia is huge. My understanding of sales in Australia is that for every individual volume, sales aren’t all that different from what they are in the UK. In the UK, as I understand

it, the Thatcher reforms effectively ended what used to be a very large sales market, which was the council libraries. So even though the UK population is three times that of Australia, the sales are not three times per volume.

DX: How solid is poetry's status within the Australian educational system?

DM: It's solid as a category; it's present and it's never going to go away. But solid in terms of an understanding or grasp of it, I don't think so. Poetry is a very canonical thing or at least in Australia it is. I'm sure it's the same everywhere. So the same poets get to be taught over and over. That's one of the conservative forces in poetry. There's not a lot of engagement in primary and secondary education with contemporary poetry as an art form, but there is engagement with it as a canonical device. In the universities I think that there's a great deal more openness and support but that is in decline from what it was. Up to recently, you used to have writers-in-residence programmes and poets quite often used to be part of that. That doesn't exist anymore. But, on the contrary, now you have people like me who are primarily poets being employed in academic situations. That didn't happen before or it was always a poet who happened to be an academic. So it's interesting that things are shifting and not necessarily declining.

DX: Is there sufficient support for the promotion of poetry in education?

DM: Yes and no. There is the opportunity for publishers to lobby people involved in the curriculum in the secondary sphere, but again it's a conservative function.

DX: What are the challenges?

DM: Everybody in the poetry world in Australia knows my press [Puncher & Wattmann]. Most of them would acknowledge that if it's not the leading press, it's one of the top two or three. However, in the general populace my press would have little recognition because it publishes poetry and poetry appeals to a few thousand people in Australia as a serious pastime. So the challenges are to get people involved in the curriculum and the educational sphere to understand where the press stands. That's the hardest thing. The other thing is to get them to understand what we think is good and why we think something is good. Also, the other big challenge is that a lot of my students in

creative writing are actually education students. God help us if they are to become poetry teachers because a lot of them are terrible.

DX: In what sense?

DM: They have no understanding of poetry, poor written communication skills, and, despite my best efforts, they have a very poor ability to read a poem. I think the way that poetry is taught is a very big challenge. When teaching first-year university students, I find that the challenge is undoing the way poetry was taught to them as some kind of super crossword puzzle; undoing that and then getting them to appreciate it as an art form. It’s a decoding thing and that’s the very first thing that you have to undo.

DX: What should be done to promote poetry in education even more broadly?

DM: A couple of things. At primary level, we need to let kids understand that poetry can be fun and just leave it at that. In the secondary sphere, we need to give resources to teachers; we need to teach the teacher. I think that’s the big thing. There are very few books out there that can do that. My press [Puncher & Wattmann] has published one, *The Weekly Poem*.³¹ It’s been put together by a prominent Melbourne poet. It’s a book with 52 exercises on 52 different forms or themes. It just simply shows teachers what a villanelle does, what a pantoum does; this is a sestina, this is a sonnet, this is a poem in heroic couplets. We need to demystify poetry, but the other key thing is to get the curriculum changed so that the poetry that kids read is actually relevant to them and not written by someone from a foreign time or place. I think in Australia we need to teach more contemporary Australian poetry.

DX: What are the benefits of teaching poetry writing to young people?

DM: I think it’s a great thing for young people. It gives them the possibility of an outlet. Kids in trouble can find a means of self-expression. Poetry can be a great encouragement for people who find it difficult to express themselves. I think it can help them to be more imaginative. It can lead to greater interest and greater awareness of language itself. These are all hugely beneficial things.

DX: What do you hope to achieve by means of a poetry workshop with young people?

31 J. Albiston (ed.), *The Weekly Poem: 52 Exercises in Closed and Open Forms* (Glebe, 2014).

DM: Usually it's trying to get them to think critically about what they've just done. It's about praising what they've done, obviously, because their confessional poems are of a very personal nature. You wouldn't want to denigrate their feelings but you'd want to get them to see that their feelings can be expressed better or differently. In order to be able to do that, they need to become critical and objective. So it's really about teaching that objectivity and critical distance. That's what I hope to achieve.

DX: How do young people usually respond to such workshops?

DM: The very first time it can go very badly. They can get very upset; sometimes they walk out. But I'm fairly tactful.

DX: Why do they react in that way?

DM: I remember in particular one student I had who was obviously very bright and wrote these poems which were very puzzling. I started making suggestions and he said, 'You don't understand what I'm doing.' He explained what he was doing and I said, 'That's a very interesting explanation but are you aware that we could possibly read it this way?' Then he got puzzled and offended. I think sensitivity is a challenge. Sometimes it's ignorance in the sense that they can't see that anything I have to say can be of any possible relevance or benefit because they've said what they wanted to say. I think that sort of emphatic identity with the poem is a problem that needs to be addressed. They see any questioning of their work as a personal attack. It's fairly common.

DX: You've mentioned that you've worked with prospective teachers. What are your views on their approach to poetry teaching?

DM: The very good ones benefit from what I teach them because I take a very broad approach. The bad ones have a terrible approach because I don't think I really get through to them. They come out with pass grades and their written expression is terrible. They don't graduate beyond the idea that the poet uses language, the poet uses metaphor; it's as if a machine has put it altogether. The better ones are able to see deeper underlying patterns. Nearly all of them are terrible at prosody. It's very puzzling to me but prosody is the hardest thing to teach about poetry. I lead by example, so I often read poems with them. What I hope for is that the best ones would learn how to read a poem they've never encountered before. If I don't understand the symbology or the metaphor, what do I make of the music and the prosody? If I can't

really understand the prosody, what do I make of the lineation? I try to develop all these different levels to approach poetry. In a sense, it probably comes from a structuralist point of view. There are levels and hierarchies which interact and can be seen.

DX: Do these prospective teachers enrol on your courses as readers and writers of poetry?

DM: Very very few of them come in as readers of poetry; maybe about 1 to 5%. Surprisingly, a lot come in as writers of poetry; maybe 20%. I’m making these figures up but it’s obviously not many.

DX: Are the writers of poetry also readers of the genre?

DM: Most generally not. They would have read whatever they were taught at school. But the writers of poetry always exceed the readers of poetry.

DX: Do they have the conception that you can write poetry without reading it?

DM: Yes, yes! I think that it’s something very much encouraged at school: being creative is good in itself. It’s something I question.

DX: What kind of support should teachers be given to become more effective teachers of poetry?

DM: I think what doesn’t exist to my knowledge is a book about how to teach poetry. I don’t think that book exists or if it does I’m not aware of it. That would be very interesting. That would be the biggest thing that could make a difference. It would assume a lot of knowledge which many teachers might not have even if they’ve studied poetry. I think it would be brilliant. I really think it would be amazing.

DX: Does pre- and in-service education in Australia enable teachers to become effective poetry teachers?

DM: I’m not aware of any in-service training related to poetry-teaching and I’m probably in a situation to know if there was because of my role as a board member of Australian Poetry. But certainly I’ve never encountered anything specifically geared towards poetry. There are lectures given by this university [Sydney] and other universities to HSC [Higher School Certificate] students on poetry, but nothing I know of that specifically caters for teachers.

DX: How important is it for teachers to position themselves as readers and writers of poetry? How do you seek to achieve this by means of your workshops?

DM: I don't think it's important to be able to write poetry in order to teach it, but I think it's important to read it. Very few people read poetry for pleasure without also writing it. It's that funny kind of thing. I think a teacher of poetry should at the very least consume the anthologies and be vaguely aware of what's going on from year to year as the different anthologies come out and maybe follow the poetry reviews in the metropolitan dailies. That would be a fairly base level engagement with poetic culture and that would probably be OK.

DX: At certain levels of the educational system teachers are expected to enable students to write poetry. Is it important for these teachers to actually have practice in the writing of poetry in order for them to do that?

DM: I think that would be ideal but it's not absolutely necessary. Again that's where a book like *The Weekly Poem* would be useful because it's aimed for teachers and students alike. So in a sense, the teacher could be undergoing the same educational experience as their students. I think that's possible.

DX: Would teachers be able to do what you do as a poet with young people? Would they be able to teach poetry writing as effectively as a published poet?

DM: I have no doubt that very effective teachers could do what I do with young people. It might be that I'm not as effective a teacher as they could be but my knowledge would certainly exceed theirs. So it's a question of weighing up what's more important: the effectiveness of a teacher or the knowledge of a poet. I have a feeling that probably my knowledge would make it a better experience for the younger person, but certainly teaching prepubescent people is a skill which you need training for. The ideal situation would be dual teaching.

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