

Galvanizing Empathy through Poetry

In this article, the authors consider how to use poetry to develop empathy for asylum seekers among their students in Malta, where asylum seeking is a present and divisive issue.

One of the most fundamental results that could be hoped for out of the education of young people is their ability to manifest empathy. In 1909, the psychologist Edward Titchener introduced the term *empathy* into English as a translation of the German word *Einfühlung* (Stueber). R. H. Fogle and J. Barnouw explain that “*Empathy* is usually defined as a projection of oneself into the other or identification with the other, but the term, in fact, has referred to many divergent phenomena in both psychology and aesthetics” (408; italics in original). Despite this complication, for the purposes of this article we are going to rely on Claudio Rud’s definition of empathy as “a form of mutual grasp of the experiential reality of the other and of our own” (163). Anthony M. Clohesy argues that “empathy can make us more receptive to the transformative power of Art, which, in return, can make us more empathically attuned to the lives of others” (63). This kind of attunement is necessary as it allows people to embrace diversity. Peter F. Schmid posits that “To be empathic means building a bridge to an unknown land. Empathy bridges the gap between differences, between persons—without removing the gap, without ignoring the differences” (65). Empathy is thus a means of cognitively and emotionally understanding the experiences undergone by the other while engaging in self-awareness.

Poetry is an excellent vehicle for consolidating empathy. Geri Giebel Chavis believes that “poems form noteworthy juxtapositions between the readers’ world and the world created within

the literary work” (165). According to Todd O. Williams, “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” (17). By developing empathic understanding through the reading of poetry in the classroom, students “begin to see themselves and others, and themselves through others in a safe environment” (Williams 20). It seems that the effective harnessing of poetry in the education of young people can help them develop into empathic men and women.

A lot has been written about the significance of incorporating multicultural literature in the curriculum for the vicarious experiences it affords (Boyd; Dong; Xerri). Poetry is especially useful in the effort to encourage young people to value diversity. 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 165). According to Ava L. McCall, “Poems make abstract issues of cultural diversity and racial, economic, and gender injustices real. Poetry definitely offers rich learning opportunities” (176). Using poetry by contemporary multicultural poets can serve “to empower students to become engaged in the educational process while at the same time developing cross-cultural understanding of their own place in the world” (Thomas and Raina 86). For example, Chavis talks about how the poem “Exile” by Nazand Begikhani allows one to “empathize with the everyday life and mindset of an individual caught between two cultures, trying

to find a sense of identity in alien surroundings” (165). The use of multicultural poetry in the English classroom can act as an effective means of galvanizing empathy in young people. In this article, we describe how we sought to achieve that goal by means of our poetry lessons at a school in Malta.

Societal Context

Malta is a small nation comprised of an archipelago in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. The country lies 80 kilometers south of Sicily and 333 kilometers north of Libya. As a former colony of the British Empire, Malta recognizes English as one of its two official languages. The majority of its 415,000 citizens are bilingual, learning English and Maltese from a young age.

Due to its proximity to North Africa, every year Malta receives thousands of asylum seekers from a number of war-torn sub-Saharan countries. Most of these irregular immigrants are smuggled over from Libya in small rickety boats that are usually loaded beyond their capacity. Once they arrive in Malta, these immigrants are placed in secure detention facilities for periods stretching up to 18 months while their asylum applications are being processed. UNHCR statistics show that since 2002 Malta has received more than 18,000 asylum seekers, which for a densely populated country of only 316 kilometers squared represents a challenge. In 2013 alone, 2,008 immigrants arrived in Malta in 24 boats. Half of these immigrants were Somalis,

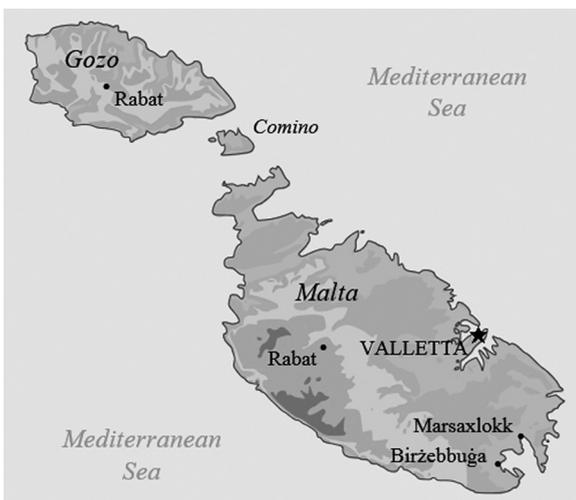
while 23 percent hailed from Eritrea. A quarter of these immigrants were registered as children. More than 400 refugees were relocated to the United States or to EU countries. Over the past decade, the United States has accepted more than 1,300 immigrants; however, almost a third of all the boat arrivals from Libya since 2002 have remained in Malta. This phenomenon has had an obvious impact on Malta’s social fabric, leading to a much more multicultural society than previously existed.

Educational Context

We teach English to 16- to 18-year-old students at a postsecondary institution that acts as a preparatory school for those aiming to pursue undergraduate studies at university. Out of a population of around 2,800 students, 400 of them choose to study English at Advanced Level. The curriculum consists of a number of literature, language, and linguistics components. Students enroll at this school at the end of compulsory education and after doing a two-year course they sit for a nine-hour examination testing their knowledge and skills in relation to the different components. Poetry features in two of these components in the form of a set text and an unseen poem. The set text is currently a selection of Wilfred Owen’s war poems and this is taught by means of lectures. Preparation for the unseen poem is tackled in literary criticism seminars. Teachers are free to choose whichever poems they want their students to discuss in the seminars, but usually these consist of canonical texts written by white, Anglo-American poets. Due to a lack of reading of poetry for pleasure, students’ exposure to the genre is dependent on their academic studies. Their knowledge of poetry is limited to their teachers’ choice of poems, and thus their awareness of multicultural poetry is practically nonexistent.

Classroom Research

Aware that some of our students might harbor prejudices toward asylum seekers, we sought to galvanize their empathy by critically engaging them with a poem by Caasha Lul Mohamud Yusuf, a female poet who migrated to the UK in 1990 after fleeing the civil war in Somalia. “The Sea Migrations” was co-translated into English from Somali



Map of Malta from Wikimedia

by the British poet Clare Pollard, who claims that Caasha's poetry "seeks to directly engage the audience and make them question their own lives." Our choice to use a poem in translation written by a non-Anglo-American poet was innovative given the kind of poetry that our students usually engage with. Xerri points out that "Multicultural poetry is typically associated with ethnic minorities and other socioeconomically marginalized and underrepresented groups. Usually their literature is as sidelined in the curriculum as it is in society" (65). We decided to use Caasha's poem because of our belief that the experience of engaging with a silenced voice would be personally and culturally enriching for our students.

We opted to use the poem with two different classes of 11 and 14 students, respectively. We planned our one-hour lesson in such a way that we could gauge our students' beliefs and attitudes toward immigrants prior to and after critically engaging with Caasha's poem. The written pieces we collected in each one of these stages allowed us to analyze whether the poem had led to any form of development.

Plumbing Students' Prejudices

We started by writing "Sea Migrations" on the board and asking students to reflect on what they associated the term with. We encouraged them to jot down notes in relation to this term, working individually at first and then discussing their ideas with a partner. After that, we asked the students to share their thoughts with the rest of the class. Despite showing an awareness of the fact that immigrants leave their country due to war and persecution, students came up with mostly negative associations in relation to "Sea Migrations." As we had anticipated, this activity would reveal students' ingrained sense of suspicion of immigrants. In fact, the most common ideas elicited by the term "Sea Migrations" were racism, cultural differences, tension and lack of security, overpopulation, job availability, the economic burden, and the devaluing of citizenship.

Eight students mentioned the term *racism*, claiming that the presence of immigrants "might provoke anger or racism in the locals." The idea that the immigrants are to blame for racist attitudes was

highlighted by the comment, "Migrants should be educated better in order to fit in with our way of life thus reducing racism." This sentiment is linked to the idea of cultural diversity, which was depicted negatively by the students. One student maintained, "They have to remember that this is not their native country and should respect the rules." The students seemed to agree with the idea that "our country is changing its culture because of them." What was probably being foregrounded here was the belief that the Maltese culture is being threatened by the immigrants' arrival and by their apparent failure to integrate.

Six students highlighted the tension and lack of security caused by the presence of immigrants. One student pointed out that "racial conflicts are created because the minority wants more rights." A classmate of hers explained that "tension is caused by Muslims' demands to remove the cross in classrooms." These students seemed to concur with the idea that "it is not pleasant for the Maltese that immigrants enter the country, are taken care of for free, and are then made to feel unsafe." They indicated that "news reports are constantly saying that many immigrants commit violence and cause a lot of trouble." According to these students, tension is generated by the immigrants' attitudes toward living in Malta: "they think they can do anything they want in our country." One student remarked, "What I don't like is their attitude. They act as though Malta is theirs. Even when they travel by bus, it is like they are special and don't even need a ticket." The students seem to perceive the immigrants as having an unjustified sense of entitlement and to be prone to intimidating behavior.

Overpopulation was another common concern raised by the students, with seven of them pointing out that "illegal immigration is causing a problem since, for a country like ours, a high population density is difficult to deal with." Three students in particular agreed that "the streets in Malta have become slowly overcrowded with African immigrants." The demographic issue is linked to the fear that jobs might be taken by immigrants. Six students mentioned that "immigrants tend to take our jobs as they are usually paid less." The immigrants'

This activity would reveal students' ingrained sense of suspicion of immigrants.

presence in Malta was also perceived as an economic burden by a few students, who explained that “they are using our taxes so as to have a home where to live, but that means our families are having to pay a larger amount of tax.” Four students seemed to feel affronted by the fact that immigrants could easily be granted Maltese citizenship. One student, for example, claimed that “eventually some of them get a passport, which makes them Maltese and entitled to anything a Maltese citizen is entitled to.” These students seem to be implying that the Maltese nation needs to be protected from the threat posed by immigrants.

The negative views expressed by our students are typical of the prejudices tangible in various sectors of Maltese society, especially among those people who resist the appeal of cultural diversity. A segment of the population considers the arrival of immigrants as tantamount to an invasion. Tensions are sometimes apparent in certain towns and villages and the immigrants are accused of being unhygienic and intimidating. They are perceived as having criminal tendencies and are blamed for making certain parts of the country feel unsafe and for causing a drop in property prices in those areas where they take up residence once they are granted asylum by the authorities. However, these fears are symptomatic of a society that, while still being highly insular, is quickly having to adapt to the phenomenon of multiculturalism.

Galvanizing Students' Empathy

We proceeded by telling students that “The Sea Migrations” was the title of a poem by a Somali poet and we encouraged them to predict what kind of perspective the poem would present. After that we provided the students with a copy of the poem and invited them to read it, respond to it, and make a note of their thoughts about it. We wanted them to formulate an interpretation of the poem by critically engaging with it in the same manner adopted for other poems we tackled in literary criticism seminars. Hence the students paid attention to the speaker’s point of view, the poet’s use of imagery and diction, and the poem’s theme, structure, tone, and versification. However, we also encouraged them to reflect on the poem’s connection to their

feelings and views in relation to sea migrations. Williams considers it “essential . . . to always go beyond simply having students react to texts. We always want them to analyze their reactions based on their experiences or personality traits . . . but also to examine the roots of their reactions” (24). In this way it is hoped that students substitute any prejudices with empathy.

Once the students had developed a personal response to the poem, we invited them to share their views with their peers by working in groups of four. We monitored the discussion taking place in each group, making a note of the most salient issues. We realized that the majority of the students adopted a sympathetic view of the immigrants’ plight as described by Caasha. They debated the reasons for which people might feel compelled to abandon their home to start a new life in a foreign country as well as the repercussions experienced by Somalia due to the exodus of its younger generations. After some time, we conducted a class debate by asking each group to report the main issues they had explored in their discussion of the poem. We encouraged the students to question each other’s views about the poem and to relate it to their own experiences of immigrants in Malta. It was surprising to note that despite the presence of a large immigrant community in the country only two students had actually conversed with asylum seekers. However, we were pleased to note that a number of students had linked the experience of Somali immigrants to that of Maltese immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s, thousands of whom had boarded ships bound for Australia and the United States.

At the end of the class debate, we gave the students 15 minutes to write down a paragraph detailing their main thoughts about Caasha’s poem. When we analyzed the students’ writing we noticed that the poem had enabled them to exercise their empathic understanding by shifting away from a position of distrust, fear, and apprehension of immigrants to one of sympathy and compassion. The students seemed more disposed to temper any misgivings about the immigrants’ presence in Malta with a sense of acceptance and tolerance.

Without any prompting by us, most of the students mentioned the notion of empathy. Andrea, for example, asserted that “the poem makes me

empathize with those people born less fortunate than me.” Kevin explained that “the poem personally makes me pity these people because it is clear that they suffer when they migrate, which we think is easy to do.” Aaron admitted that the poem made him “feel sympathetic towards these people who don’t have a choice. It makes me feel guilty as to how I previously viewed these immigrants. The poem is a real eye-opener; its effect is to teach many people like me not to prematurely judge others when knowing only half of it.” Amy agreed with him and confessed that “the guilt is shared. . . . The poet does this because although many of us claim we are not racists and that we understand and sympathize with their situation, we don’t do anything to help them.” Martina affirmed that the poem helped her “see how difficult it really is for these illegal immigrants to leave everything behind.” She pointed out that “the poem makes the reader realize that these immigrants are not treated as human and they are not respected at all.” In fact, three students used the term *dehumanization* in talking about how immigrants are treated. A sense of empathic attunement seemed to have been distilled by means of the students’ engagement with Caasha’s poem.

Just like Aaron, a number of students described the poem as revelatory. Dorian, for example, felt the poem had provided him with access to a viewpoint he rarely came across: “this poem has changed my perspective because I never knew what they actually went through.” Kailyze maintained that “the fact the poem seems to be based on the true experiences of a Somali makes you re-think your views.” Similarly, Wayne pointed out that “As a reader, reading the very graphic description of the immigrants’ pain made me realize that this is the truth of what actually happens.” The poem seemed effective in providing students with a cross-cultural insight into a situation they were detached from.

Having been quick to blame immigrants before their reading of the poem, some students subsequently revised their views and admitted that “immigrants end up in a trap laid by others.” Michaela, for example, remarked that “it is not their fault that they end up like that.” Catriona concurred and claimed that “one starts to feel compassion for these unfortunate people as they are most often judged and misunderstood.” This is probably what

led quite a number of students to conclude their written response by sharing the sentiment expressed by Marisabelle’s demand that “our country should tolerate and respect immigrants rather than hating or ignoring them.” This attitudinal shift seems to indicate that multicultural poetry can enable students to reflect on their beliefs in relation to immigrants and acknowledge how these lead to prejudices.

In their reading of the poem, students did not just restrict themselves to the suffering experienced by immigrants in the course of crossing the Mediterranean. Many of them also picked up on Caasha’s idea that the immigrants’ “Love for their country has disappeared” because they have turned their backs on Somalia. Prompted by her question, “who’ll stay behind in our country?”, some students were struck by the concept of not being able to stay on and fight for the good of one’s homeland. This indicates that the students were sensitive to the issue of identity and developed an awareness of what else the immigrants had sacrificed apart from physical and psychological well-being.

Conclusion

This article is not meant to imply that by means of one poem students can be completely transformed into empathic individuals. We are aware of the challenges to such transformation, including classroom compliance with teacher expectations. Nonetheless, it seems clear that Caasha’s poem inspired our students to demonstrate empathy toward a group of people they had most probably always seen as alien to their insular community. After having been judgmental in relation to irregular migration, possibly because of all the monochromatic news reports they heard on a regular basis, they were galvanized into showing empathy by exploring the perspective of an immigrant, the voice that is usually stifled in the media. Their engagement with the poem in class enabled them to revise their preconceptions and to advocate a more sympathetic attitude toward immigrants and their plight. Moreover, we hope that this lesson served to nudge them into a long-term embrace of the emerging multiculturalism of contemporary Maltese society. 

A number of students described the poem as revelatory.

Works Cited

- Begikhani, Nazand. "Exile." *After Shocks: The Poetry of Recovery for Life-Shattering Events*. Ed. Tom Lombardo. Atlanta: Sante Lucia, 2008. 81. Print.
- Boyd, Fenice B. "Conditions, Concessions, and the Many Tender Mercies of Learning through Multicultural Literature." *Reading Research and Instruction* 42.1 (2002): 58–92. Print.
- Chavis, Geri Giebel. "Looking Out and Looking In: Journeys to Self-Awareness and Empathy through Creative Juxtapositions." *Journal of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research and Education* 26.3 (2013): 159–67. Print.
- Clohesy, Anthony M. *Politics of Empathy: Ethics, Solidarity, Recognition*. New York: Routledge, 2013. Print.
- Dong, Yu Ren. "Bridging the Cultural Gap by Teaching Multicultural Literature." *The Educational Forum* 69.4 (2005): 367–82. Print.
- Fogle, R. H., and J. Barnouw. "Empathy and Sympathy." *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Ed. Roland Greene. 4th ed. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012. 408–09. Print.
- McCall, Ava L. "Using Poetry in Social Studies Classes to Teach about Cultural Diversity and Social Justice." *The Social Studies* 95.4 (2004): 172–76. Print.
- Mohamud Yusuf, Caasha Lul. "The Sea Migrations." *Poems Maansooyin*. Trans. Clare Pollard, Said Jama Hussein, and Mohamed Xasan ("Alto"). London: Poetry Translation Centre, 2012. 11–15. Print.
- Pollard, Clare. "Clare Pollard on Translating Caasha Lul Mohamud Yusuf." Poetry Translation Centre, 17 Apr. 2012. Web. 7 May 2014.
- Rud, Claudio. "Empathy: The Adventure of Being Present." *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies* 2.3 (2003): 162–71. Print.
- Schmid, Peter F. "Knowledge or Acknowledgement? Psychotherapy as 'the Art of Not Knowing': Prospects on Further Developments of a Radical Paradigm." *Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies* 1.1–2 (2002): 57–68. Print.
- Stueber, Karsten. "Empathy." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. 2014. Web. 7 June 2014.
- Thomas, Norma D., and J. León Raina. "Breaking Barriers: Using Poetry as a Tool to Enhance Diversity Understanding with Youth and Adults." *Journal of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research and Education* 25.2 (2012): 83–93. Print.
- UNHCR. "Malta Asylum Trends 2013." UNHCR Malta, 15 Feb. 2014. Web. 7 May 2014.
- Williams, Todd O. "A Poetry Therapy Model for the Literature Classroom." *Journal of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research and Education* 24.1 (2011): 17–33. Print.
- Xerri, Daniel. "Multicultural Poetry in ELT: Benefits, Challenges and Strategies." *Plurilingualism: Promoting Cooperation between Communities, People and Nations*. Ed. Pilar Díez, Rebecca Place, and Olga Fernández. Bilbao: University of Deusto, 2012. 65–79. Print.

Daniel Xerri (daniel.xerri@um.edu.mt) is presently completing doctoral research at the University of York on the interplay between teachers' beliefs and practices in relation to poetry. **Stephanie Xerri Agius** (stephanie.xerri-agius@um.edu.mt) is completing doctoral research at the University of Leicester on the feedback practices involved in the teaching of writing about literature.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION	Lisa Storm Fink, RWT
<p>Incorporating literature from diverse cultures and with diverse points of view means more than adding new books to the reading list. Exposing students to literature from and about the Middle East requires particular sensitivity, as students may approach the text with incorrect, often negative, prejudices. This lesson supports the use of multicultural literature through modification of traditional literature circle roles using a cultural response perspective. Students read and share their responses and research in collaborative groups. At the end of the lesson, they write a letter about their book's main character as if he or she has just moved to their school and community. http://bit.ly/1v9Z4eN</p>	

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.