

Once preferred, now peripheral: Poetry and the national assessment for Year 11 students in New Zealand post-primary schools

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ABSTRACT: Fifty years ago poetry was a key element in the English programme in most secondary schools in New Zealand. Today many teachers avoid teaching poetry for several reasons, one of these being the nature of the assessment of the subject, English, by the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) set up by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). The outcome has been the setting up of a cycle of disadvantage whereby many students may never have the opportunity to study or write a poem in school. Such students leave school without having encountered literary study at its most intense and refined, which employs the most concentrated use of language and gives valuable access to the imaginative dimension of language. These students will, in their turn, as educators of the next generation, fail to transmit these qualities to others.

KEYWORDS: Achievement Initiative, English curriculum, NCEA, New Zealand Curriculum Framework, pedagogy, poetry.

INTRODUCTION

It is of course within poetry and drama that the use of language goes deepest. Nobody should have to teach poetry against his will but without it English will never be complete: poetry is not a minor amenity but a major channel of experience (HMSO, 1963, p. 156)¹.

An investigation of the pedagogical and curricular contexts within which English has been taught in New Zealand post-primary schools in the past 60 years indicates that, while poetry is cited in the 1945 curriculum for English and in all curriculum statements since, including the current *English in the New Zealand Curriculum (ENZC)* (Ministry of Education, 1994), little emphasis is being placed upon the teaching of poetry in schools at post-primary level. I became aware of this situation through my attendance at conferences of the New Zealand Association of Teachers of English (NZATE); conversing with my colleagues in the Speech Communication Association (SCA (NZ) Inc.), many of whom teach English in schools; comparing notes with colleagues in the Society of Teachers of Speech and Drama (STSD) in the UK; speaking with my speech and drama students, as well as with those candidates whom I examine at Trinity College London examination centres in New Zealand and overseas. During my MA studies, as a tutor for first-year University students studying English, I was aware of the negative attitude of many of those students towards poetry. I realised that there was a shift in pedagogy from poetry being preferred as part of the English programme to poetry becoming peripheral. This shift required research.

¹ Also called the Newsom Report, *Half our future* was commissioned by an advisory committee from the Labour Government in England to investigate education for young people aged 13 to 16 years of average and under-average abilities.

That poetry has unique value for students' learning of language and literature was supported by a preliminary reading of articles written by current teachers in a New Zealand publication for teachers of English, *English in Aotearoa*, and in the writings of educationalists and teachers such as Sue Dymoke (2005), John Gordon (2004) and Peter Benton (1999, 2000). Such material indicated that learning poetry during schooling enriches the professional and occupational lives of students in the future. This latter point emerges also from responses from my former students as discussed later in this article.

At the beginning of 2003 I set about answering my research question, "Is there a place for poetry in the teaching of English according to the current New Zealand curriculum and the national assessment procedure for Year 9, 10 and 11 students?" I limited my study to Year 9 to 11 students because a new secondary qualification, the National Certificate for Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level 1 for Year 11 students had been in progress for two years and NCEA 2 and 3 for Year 12 and 13 students had not yet been gazetted. I also began researching the programme for written, oral and visual language according to the curriculum statement for English for Year 9, 10 and 11 post-primary students, to determine the format of the prescription for the teaching of English, and poetry in particular, in preparation for assessment at Year 11.

METHODOLOGY

My approach to gathering data was to survey and interview teachers, teacher educators, student-teachers, current students, former students and university students who are both products of and providers of the practice of teaching English. Pertinent also was my research into current material from the New Zealand Ministry of Education, and journals for teachers published in New Zealand, Australia, the UK and the USA to investigate what teachers and educationalists say about the teaching of poetry in the English programme. As a background to my research I needed to understand the relationship between curricula and examination systems, and how and why changes have occurred since 1945 when I was a student in Form 5 in a New Zealand school and poetry was taught thoroughly as part of the syllabus and for external examinations.

Surveys

- a) I posted surveys² to the Heads of Departments of English (HODs) of 36 schools with return envelopes and a time frame for response. These schools were all those in the Canterbury and West Coast area of the South Island of New Zealand. Encompassing the fourth largest city in New Zealand, the area chosen is typical of most other New Zealand education regions. My purpose was to get a current overall picture of the teaching of poetry in a variety of schools: post-primary schools of different sizes, deciles³ and compositions – state and integrated, urban and rural, private of both sexes, large and small,

² Copy in Appendix 1.

³ An education term used to describe the extent to which a school draws its students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 1 refers to the 10% where the greatest number of low socio-economic families is found. Decile 10 refers to the 10% where the lowest number of low socio-economic families is found.

with students at Levels 1 to 13 and 7 to 13. HODS were invited to respond personally, to delegate the response to a colleague or to complete the paper at a staff meeting. By leaving space for comment I hoped to determine the attitudes of the teacher/s or the department of English towards the teaching of poetry and how the curriculum informed assessment. Individual teachers as well as HODS responded with 58 replies from 34 of the 36 schools. Two schools returned the forms as a staff response. Several teachers requested a follow up with personal interviews.

- b) I handed out written response questionnaires⁴ to first-year University students enrolled in English 102 (a course designed as an introduction to English to teach basic skills in academic writing and literary analysis) at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, in the third week of the Wednesday and Friday lectures of the first semester. I wanted to discover from the wide range of students enrolled in this course their experiences of poetry before they came to University and their current attitudes to poetry. 172 students were enrolled in this course. 150 attended lectures that week. 105 of these students had left school between 2001 and 2003. The remaining students had left school between 1954 and 2000, or had come from Law, History or Commerce classes to sit this course. Papers were collected after the eight to ten minutes allowed for completion. Students were assured their responses did not affect their grading for the course.
- c) Survey papers with return envelopes were sent to former students of mine to investigate why studying, learning and writing poetry worked so well for these men and women to whom I taught English, and poetry in particular, in schools and in classes for individual or group tuition in speech and drama from 1954 to 2000. I wished to compare their attitudes with those of current students and teachers. Using "off-the-top-of-my-head" addresses, initially, I sent papers to twelve former students whom I taught at post-primary schools between 1954 and 1965. As these students responded by return mail, I sent out a further 48 papers⁵ to students to whom I taught English in school between the years 1954 and 1973, and students to whom I taught speech and drama from 1973 to 2000. I selected these students from those of whose current addresses, and married, single or religious names I was sure. I randomly covered the age-groups, selecting every third or fourth entry. The selection did not depend upon occupation/profession or scholarship. I had not been in touch with 25 of these students since I had taught them. Responses indicated all except four were keen to reply. As some respondents distributed copies of the survey to husbands/wives and friends who had not been sent copies, I received 72 responses.
- d) I sent written response questionnaires⁶ to 15 prospective teachers trained with teacher educator, Ronnie Davey, at the Christchurch College of Education (CCE)⁷ four to six years previously. These were selected from addresses

⁴ Copy in Appendix 2.

⁵ Copy in Appendix 3.

⁶ Copy in Appendix 4.

⁷ Teaching English or EN311 describes this course for those wishing to teach English in post-primary schools.

available.) Others had either resigned from teaching, had moved outside New Zealand, or were uncontactable because of privacy laws.) My aim was investigate if they were still teaching English as demonstrated at the CCE when they were trained. All 15 replied, six of them by email.

Interviews

Interviews were planned to clarify and further develop hypotheses that surfaced from the survey papers. Each interview (see below) required a different set of questions and a different time frame. In these interviews (apart from 3 and 4) names were changed for privacy reasons.

1. In-depth informal interviews at schools for about an hour were prearranged with nine teachers of senior English, two teachers of Junior English and two Year 13 students. I alerted interviewees to three open-ended questions:
 - a) What was their practice of teaching/learning poetry?
 - b) What effects had the current curriculum and assessment process had upon their teaching/learning practices?
 - c) What were the attitudes of students towards poetry?

I indicated there would be time for discussion of any other areas of significance. Interviews were to be recorded and copies would be available to interviewees if requested.

2. Six student-teachers enrolled in the CCE EN311 2005 course were interviewed individually, and seven students in two small groups. The purpose was to discover their response to the course after two weeks' work. I was also able to interview five of these student-teachers individually after they had experienced two sections at schools with associate teachers.⁸ Three students chose to email me their comments.
3. In-depth interviews of about one-and-a-half hours each were held with Ronnie Davey, a teacher educator at the CCE. Questions were set concerning the CCE course and teaching practice in general. In a café in Newry, I interviewed Kate O'Hanlon, teacher educator in Northern Ireland regarding the teaching of English in the UK and Northern Ireland. Interviewees had been notified of the general points to be discussed (similar to those sent to teachers). I requested copies of course material and relevant matter used in teaching practice.
4. An informal half-hour session to discuss poetry in *ENZC* and its place in the National Certificate for Educational Achievement (NCEA) was arranged with Dr Graham Stoop, at the time Principal of the CCE. Stoop was formerly HOD of English of a very large Christchurch post-primary school and is currently chairman of the Education Review Office (ERO).⁹ His wide experience as a

⁸ Each student-teacher has an associate teacher in a class to observe, and to guide him/her when given teaching tasks. The associate writes a report on the student-teacher's approach to teaching.

⁹ The Education Review Office is a government agency which reports publicly on the education and care of students in all New Zealand schools and early childhood centres.

teacher of English with a passionate interest in poetry was invaluable for my research.

5. An hour-and-a-half was set aside for an interview with two students: a Year 11 student and a Year 13 student. I selected these students from those I teach because they attended the same schools, but had different teachers for English in those schools. I asked them to bring their English portfolios and end-of-year reports. The discussion centred on the teaching and learning of poetry from year 7 to the current work at Year 11 and 13, and its application to answering sections in English Levels 1 and 3 of the NCEA.
6. To add a wider dimension to my case study I had spontaneous informal discussions with four groups of speech and drama students currently at post-primary schools throughout New Zealand. These students study, memorise and perform poetry at examination centres for Speech New Zealand and Trinity College London, and at Performance Festivals. I wanted to discover if these students could cross-credit material prepared for speech and drama examinations and performance towards NCEA 1, 2 and 3 assessments, as is the case in assessments in Australia and tertiary study in the UK.¹⁰ I also inquired about the depth at which poetry was studied in their post-primary classes at Years 9 to 13, when compared with their study in speech and drama classes.

Personal observation

In conjunction with the interviews with the Christchurch College of Education (CCE) student-teachers, former and current, I was present at and participated in activities during the first five weeks of classes at the CCE for graduates enrolled in EN311 course 2005 – the teaching of written, oral and visual language, and an examination of *ENZC* and NCEA assessments. Reference to this course is found towards the end of this article.

Analysing my data, I have been able to identify some of the problems teachers encounter in teaching poetry as an essential part of the English programme, and in particular, the pressure that accrues from the format of our national examinations. It is this aspect on which I want to focus. In this article, however, I cannot give full coverage of the wealth of material obtained from all survey papers and interviews. Salient points from some respondents will demonstrate the case for poetry in relation to national assessment.

But first I need to explain briefly the development of the education system in New Zealand to analyse the shift that has occurred from the studying and learning of poetry as an integral part of the English programme in the 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s to the pedagogy followed in today's schools subject to *ENZC* and the NCEA.

¹⁰ Cross-crediting does not occur in New Zealand.

THE NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM FROM 1946 TO THE PRESENT DAY

Between 1946 and 1964 all post-primary schools in New Zealand followed a curriculum based on the Thomas report (Department of Education, 1944)¹¹. The report recommended a School Certificate examination for Year 11/12 (Forms 6 and 6A) students (as some might take two years to prepare for the examination) be conducted annually by the Department of Education in a wide range of subjects. In Years 9 (Form 3) and 10 (Form 4)¹², the core subjects were: English language and literature, general science, social studies, general science, elementary mathematics, music, a craft or one of the fine arts and physical education. Completion of satisfactory work in these subjects was required of all candidates for the School Certificate Examination. For the School Certificate examination, English was compulsory and candidates could choose a minimum of three other subjects from a wide range of 31 subjects. 200 marks from four subjects were required for a pass, with 30 per cent in English. A mark below 30 per cent was discounted. While English as a subject was compulsory, candidates could avoid answering literature questions in the optional sections. This examination was marked by teachers selected by and under the direction of a chief examiner appointed by the Department of Education.

Entry to Form 6 was not officially dependent upon passing School Certificate but schools generally considered this a prerequisite. Students at this level prepared for either Endorsed School Certificate (accredited by the school) or the University Entrance Examination (UE) conducted by the University Entrance Board. Later, schools were permitted to accredit a certain number of students with UE. The remainder sat the external examination. English was a compulsory subject for these examinations. A poem was usually set for comprehension purposes. Students might then return to school at Form 6A level to compete for a scholarship for University study through the Board's Entrance Scholarship examination. English at this level was not compulsory.

In 1969 responses from teachers and other professionals indicated concern about the prescription for English during the final years at school. The National English Syllabus Committee (NESC) began work to revise the English syllabus for Forms 3 to 5 and to prepare a new School Certificate examination prescription in English. After many phases of the project for curriculum revision, the NESC *Statement of Aims* (Department of Education, 1983) was approved by the Minister of Education in 1982. English remained a compulsory subject for School Certificate and became internally assessed and externally moderated, as did other subjects – if the school so wished. The School Certificate Examination “at one point in time a qualification sought after by the ambitious few ... became a qualification which was sat ... by the majority of Form 5 pupils” (Openshaw, Lee & Lee, 1993, p. 221). Consequently, many more students remained at school to gain higher qualifications necessitating more teachers with higher levels of qualifications to teach them.

The question of how students ought to be evaluated and arguments for and against examinations continued during the 80s and 90s, especially with regard to the Form 5

¹¹ Named after the chairman of a committee of 14 persons set up by the then Minister of Education.

¹² At Years 9 and 10, students' ages usually ranged from 11 to 15 depending upon the completion of Form 2 (Year 8) at an intermediate or primary school.

syllabus. In 1991, in a number of gazetted announcements, the new National Government began the implementation of a series of radical curriculum reforms (Ministry of Education, 1991). Its Achievement Initiative established the parameters for the development of a new curriculum, *The New Zealand curriculum framework* (Ministry of Education, 1993). The *Curriculum Framework* identified seven essential learning areas, including language and languages, with an associated set of essential skills, such as social and co-operative skills and self-management and competitive skills. In 1992, work began on a new English curriculum, with a draft being produced in 1993 (Ministry of Education, 1993) and a final version in 1994 (Ministry of Education 1994). The new curriculum became a legal requirement for schools in 1996.

In a number of respects, the new curriculum represented a radical departure from the earlier *Statement of Aims* and preceding senior secondary syllabi. It attempted to formulate a curriculum for Years 1-13, partitioned various learning areas into “strands”, and formulated “achievement objectives” in eight linear levels for each strand. The document attracted and still attracts trenchant criticism. Warwick Elley, Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Canterbury has been a tireless critic of its 8-level structure (see, for example, Elley, 1996). Well-known writer and English academic, C.K. Stead¹³ attacked the curriculum on a number of grounds, including its perceived devaluation of literature and lack of academic rigour (Stead, 1994, 1997).

TEACHERS WORKING WITH ENZC

When analysing the curriculum in action in schools and as a preparation for national assessment, I made use of data collected from interviews with the following teachers¹⁴:

- a) Sean is Head of English at a decile-3, co-educational, post-primary city school with a role of about 700 students.
- b) Debbie teaches at a decile-8, all girls', post-primary city school with a role of about 500 students.
- c) Ron teaches at a decile-5 all-boys', city post-primary school with a role of about 1200 students.
- d) Helen teaches at a decile-9, private, all girls', Year 1-13 city school with a post-primary role of about 800 students.
- e) Marilyn is Head of English at a decile-9, co-educational, post-primary city school of 1500 students.
- f) George is a second-year teacher at Marilyn's school.
- g) Sue is Head of English at a decile-6, Year 7 to 13 area school with a role of about 350 boys and girls.
- h) Penny is principal of a decile-7, private, co-educational, post-primary city school of 1000 students.
- i) Norma teaches at the teen parent unit in a decile-6, co-educational school.
- j) Sarah teaches English at a decile-2, co-educational city school of about 600 students.
- k) A High School (decile 4) with a role of about 500 students.
- l) Staffs of English departments of two, large, post-primary schools (deciles 6 and 9).

¹³ Christian Karlson Stead: Novelist, literary critic, poet, essayist and Professor of English at the University of Auckland.

¹⁴ I have used pseudonyms.

I refer in this article also to comments made by students in survey papers and informal interviews. These were treated anonymously.

On paper, *ENZC* is a document aimed at guiding students successfully from Year 1 to Year 13 (and more recently for preparing them for NCEA Levels 1, 2 and 3, as well as Level 4, scholarship). As described in the *Curriculum Framework*, its principles

are based on the premises that the individual student is at the centre of all teaching and learning, and that the curriculum for all students will be of the highest quality. The principles affirm and reflect New Zealand's identity. They provide national direction while allowing for local discretion. All schools must ensure that the principles are embodied in their programme (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 8).

In conversation, however, Graham Stoop, referring to his PhD thesis (Stoop, 1998), commented:

The lack of theoretical underpinning to English curriculum reform in New Zealand has meant that statements which appear to follow progressive thinking...are in fact, integrated into a technicist document. The inadequate pedagogical direction in particular concerns literature and the debate over language versus literature, the literary canon versus contemporary fiction.

He added that even with this new curriculum "30 years of syllabus and curriculum debate are not over – they have only just begun".

Planning the programme

An approach to planning is set out in *ENZC* (Ministry of Education, 1994, p. 23). Reference is made to incorporating all of the new curriculum's three major strands – oral, written and visual – into an integrated language-rich environment. The relative balance of the strands are seen as depending on a range of factors suited to the needs of the students. In planning and implementing their programmes, teachers are advised to refer to the skills outlined in the *Curriculum Framework*. There are eight groupings of essential skills¹⁵ and most of these are encouraged for the development of language and learning in the curriculum.

During Years 9 and 10, students follow a programme, based on achievement objectives set out in *ENZC* for oral language (listening and speaking), written language (reading and writing), and visual language (viewing and presenting). Assessment of the progress of individual students involves a range of formal and informal approaches – self-assessment, peer assessment and teacher assessment decided by schools and English departments. Currently in the junior secondary school, assessment procedures are beginning to mirror those practiced under the new qualifications regime – the NCEA – with its emphasis on four categories: not achieved, achieved, merit and excellence. One junior teacher, Liz, remarked that "dangling NCEA before students' eyes too soon" can affect motivation to learn for its own sake rather than to pass exams. A Year 10 student endorsed that remark saying,

¹⁵ Communication skills; numeracy skills; information skills; problem-solving skills; self-management and competitive skills; social and co-operative skills; and work and study skills.

“I’m sick and tired of hearing our teachers say: ‘You’ll need to know that for NCEA’”.

In the schools where I interviewed teachers, each student in Year 9 and 10 delivers a three-minute speech before the class once a year. This is conducted (after preparation time) over a four-day period. The method of assessment is the same as that used for NCEA Level 1 (discussed later). The speech also serves as an essay or presentation of research information and is also conducted during one unit of work. Students are following the curriculum for English, but are also “having a rehearsal for NCEA 1 instead of enjoying learning new skills,” remarked Liz.

With 16 years as the leaving age for students in New Zealand schools, many more students, who might formerly have left school for employment, are now staying on at school. For many English teachers, helping students reach their potential in terms of essential skills and a large number of strands and sub-strands seems an impossible task. Teachers additionally find themselves having to provide a wide range of material for learners with special needs, including students from language backgrounds other than English, as well as acceleration¹⁶ and enrichment for others. After using *ENZC* for four years, however, some of the teachers I interviewed said that it was only by limiting options, refining moderation techniques, and omitting what is seen as “inessential”, that the curriculum became manageable. Sean commented: “If only all Year 9 students entered post-primary level with the same prior experiences. Impossible, of course.” Ron observed that “too much stuff is put into the curriculum. My students are weak on literacy. Poetry, therefore, is the reject”. The teachers admitted that teaching English is now definitely examination-oriented.

Penny, who teaches Year 9 and 10 students, felt it difficult “getting to grips with the new curriculum”. She felt there had been too many changes too soon. She felt very “inexperienced in assessing creative or poetic writing” even though the school engaged a specialist to demonstrate the process “in teacher-only days”. Penny knew the students wanted “more than a tick or a mark out of ten” but found the task “very time-consuming to be of benefit to the individual student”. Ron believed that

providing strategies to recognise the strengths, difficulties and weaknesses of all students through peer, self and teacher assessments must take into consideration the learning difficulties and behavioural problems of the students, and inadequate time allowed for the process at these levels; as well as the interruptions from sports’ practices, concert practices, medical appointments and illnesses.

Teachers were honest in both their appraisal and their adverse criticism of *ENZC*, and how it related to preparation for NCEA for Year 11 students. Opinions seemed to vary when teachers took into account the size of the school roll, the attitude of the staff to the presiding principal or head of department, the decile category given to the school, the socio-economic situation in the school and, perhaps, whether the school was single sex or co-educational.

Three main points, however, seemed to arise from my investigation of the curriculum:

¹⁶ An accelerated class usually consists of a small number of gifted students taught by a senior teacher. These students work towards Scholarship with and during NCEA Level 3 assessment study.

- The varied compositions of classes, now that the leaving age is 16 years, indicate that the wider range of abilities makes successful planning difficult;
- Trying to cover many options (geared to suit the needs of all students) with insufficient time to treat topics in depth, means some options are studied superficially, or omitted altogether;
- The moderation of the internal assessments, a way of testing helpful for many students, requires greater expertise from teachers, and is not yet deemed satisfactorily fair to all students.

These points are developed in the next section where I focus on the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA).

THE NCEA AND ENGLISH

The review of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) that led to the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) was prompted by a revolt by the universities, prominent educationalists and a number of schools against Unit Standards, a system of assessment that was trialled in New Zealand schools in the mid-1990s. The NCEA was phased in to New Zealand schools – Level 1 in 2002, Level 2 in 2003 and Level 3 in 2004 – to replace School Certificate (Year 11), Sixth Form Certificate (Year 12), University Bursary and Scholarship (Year 13). Scholarship was retained at Level 4 and has undergone changes in format over the past two years. English, however, is not and has never been a compulsory subject for Scholarship, although it is an option. Indeed, English per se, is not compulsory at any level of the NCEA, except in relation to the literacy requirements required for students contemplating tertiary study.

In terms of the NCEA:

- Canonical subjects had their content delineated by a range of “Achievement Standards” (between five and nine per subject) set out in the form of a matrix;
- Achievement Standards were developed at three levels, corresponding roughly with Year 11 (Level 1), Year 12 (Level 2) and Year 13 (Level 3);
- Some Achievement Standards were assessed internally and some (at least 50%) externally;
- The old Unit Standards were mostly retained, so that students could notionally choose from a range of Unit and Achievement Standards;
- Students sitting Achievement Standards received either credit at three different grades (achieved, merit or excellence) or no credit at all;
- Each Achievement and Unit Standards had a credit weighting, with a notional year’s work in a subject allowing for the possible achievement of 24 credits. Credits were accumulated over a range of subjects with a total of 80 credits (including 60 at the award level) required for a National Certificate to be awarded at a particular level;
- Achievement Standards were assessed according to a system of standards-based assessment, with each standard being divided into “elements”, and

“descriptors” for achieved, merit and excellence grades written for each element.¹⁷

English: NCEA Level 1

For English there are nine Achievement Standards earning two or three credits each and tallying a possible 24 credits. Of the many Achievement Standards offered for attaining credits in English study, I want to consider firstly, the six that do **not** pertain to the study of poetry.

- “Achievement Standard 1.2: produce formal writing; externally assessed: 3 credits.” (Examples from previous years’ papers invite expressive [personal, spontaneous] or transactional [informative, persuasive and argumentative] writing from a range of topics including current issues, letters to the editor and pictures).
- “Achievement Standard 1.3: read, study and show understanding of extended written text/s: externally assessed: 2 credits.” (Texts suggested for study are: novel, drama script, non-fiction and extended hyper-fiction).
- “Achievement Standard 1.5: view/listen to, study and show understanding of a visual or oral text: externally assessed: 2 credits.” (For this standard, film, television or radio programme, drama production or electronic text are offered as examples).
- “Achievement Standard 1.7: deliver a speech in a formal setting: internally assessed: 3 credits.” (Schools set the topics for these speeches as well as the method of adjudication. Teacher interviewee, Sean, said: “We have one week of five hours to hear and mark all the speeches of all the Year 11 classes. It is easier to moderate the speeches if all students choose from three open topics such as: ‘Flying high’, ‘The school of the future’ or ‘Exploration of space’”.)
- “Achievement Standard 1.8: produce a media or dramatic presentation: internally assessed: 3 credits.” (Suggestions for this standard include a media presentation, performance poetry or drama. Presentation for the media may be as a power point display, poster, static image or Web page. Much depends upon the resources available and units of work taught in the school. While performance poetry is a possibility, teacher interviewee, Helen, stated: “Time in our school does not permit classes to work upon several options. Four sessions in one week is set for each option. Although I like poetry, performance poetry is not an option as it is rarely covered satisfactorily even for short text study and static image is. We select static image.”)
- “Achievement Standard 1.9: research, organise and present information: internally assessed; 3 credits.” (The school nominates the topic for research, but the skills assessed remain the same from school to school.)

That makes a possible 16 credits. It is usual for students to prepare for these Achievement Standards using prose, non-fiction or a prose drama text selected by the school, although teachers admit that the use of other genres is clearly possible.

Poetry, however, is mentioned specifically only in

¹⁷ Like ENZC, the NCEA has had its share of critics. See see, for example, Elley, 2000; Hall, 2000; Locke, 2000.

- “Achievement Standard 1.1: produce creative writing; internally assessed: 3 credits.” (But creative writing **may** be descriptive, narrative, poetic [shaped to convey sensory or artistic qualities], a personal account, a script or a piece of hyper-fiction in prose, and frequently is.)
- “Achievement Standard 1.4: read, study and show understanding of a number of short written texts; externally assessed: 2 credits.” (Candidates **may** choose short story, short hyper-fiction or print media instead of poetry, and frequently do.)
- “Achievement Standard 1.6: read and show understanding of unfamiliar texts which include fiction, non-fiction and visual texts; externally assessed: 3 credits.” (There are options to respond to referring to several unfamiliar texts. Since 2002 a poem has been included. The candidates **may** treat the poem lightly, aiming only for an achieved pass, if they wish, and aim for higher grades in the other options.)

Subsequently, teachers may advise students to avoid using poetry altogether in these Achievement Standards, except in 1.6 where only a superficial understanding of poetic terms (often covered in Year 9) is required for an achieved result *if* a poem features on the paper.

A closer look at 1.1, 1.4 and 1.6

Moderation of internal assessment in 1.1

Produce creative writing: AS 1.1, has an internal assessment process of random marking, checking and final marking of pieces of students' writings. In one large school with a roll of 1500 students, where I interviewed the staff, there were 21 Year 11 classes. Sheila spoke of the task of internal assessment as “horrendous” because this credit, like other internally assessed credits, is worked on by all classes over the same period of time (usually 8 to 10 school days) so that no student is disadvantaged – topics being the same for all Year 11 students throughout the school.

Students are given two or three general topics such as: “Life as it is lived now, and what it might be like in the future”, according to student interviewee, Alice. In four 50-minute periods of one week, a piece of writing is drafted, worked upon and presented for checking. Students may re-work the piece according to the teacher's comments outside this time, and present the final copy by a scheduled date. Moderation follows whereby samples of possible “not achieved”, “achieved”, “merit” and “excellence” (selected by the teachers of all 21 classes) are submitted to the school moderator. A specified number of these pieces is then assessed by a nominated moderator from another school, and returned as a guide to assessing all pieces of work in that school. Although a student may receive an excellence grade from her teacher at first, when final assessments of all work, internal and external, are returned to the student in mid-January, the level of achievement may be changed. Alice reported: “I received “excellence” in all my internals, and now they have turned into “merits”.

One teacher, Sam, suggested there were ways of manipulating the national system by “omitting students' names” from the results list and of “hiding” names. Other teachers observed that there were “measures in place to prevent such practices”. But the moderation system was still “clumsy” they believed. George, commenting on the value of creative writing, said that, in his experience, “any boy with a modicum of

intelligence can produce something in prose that will register achievement". Ron, conversely, remarked that an attempt at creative writing in his Year 11 class "was unmitigated disaster, filled with angst, totally subjective, cliché-ridden, neither poetry nor prose and impossible to assess". Other teachers spoke of "models followed, and writing monitored" but according to Sarah, many students have "insufficient vocabulary and language skills to produce worthwhile results".

The overall distribution of the results for the 41,838 candidates who sat NCEA 1 in 2002 showed that more students gained excellence and merit for internally assessed work than were gained in external examinations. Teachers remarked that those who performed badly through nervousness, fear of failure or the inability to think quickly in timed, one-off papers set and marked by external examiners, might at least achieve in some areas of internal assessment. Internal assessment was seen as a valuable method of testing, but the management of it, according to teachers, was still "open to abuse and inequality" within the present system.

The writing of poetry, it seems, has a minor place in "Produce creative writing, 1.1. But that is not the case in all schools or with all teachers. Many times the statement, "It all depends upon the teacher," was quoted during interviews, and "lack of time" and "the importance of results" are seen as hindrances to students' achieving excellence in creative writing of poetry. Some teachers, passionate about poetry, found ways of inspiring their students.

A point made by a few teachers, and dealt with in many articles in journals for teachers, is the mutual connection between (a) creative writing and reading, (b) creative writing and studying poetry, (c) creative writing and the positive effect it has upon expressive and transactional writing. In "On the pedagogy of poetics: Methods for addressing problems in poetry by beginners", Claire Hero (2005) stresses that "Beginning poets (in fact, all students in creative writing classes) must read widely to relive past experiences, their own and others', and create new experiences" (p. 4). There is no dearth of resources available for teachers who may be a little diffident about teaching and assessing creative writing of poetry. And as Phil Coogan (2005) has pointed out, "Writers' window", begun in 2000 as part of the English Online website, has become a popular outlet for the publication of students' poetry.

However, as indicated above, teachers' ambivalence about teaching and assessing creative writing of poetry may be affecting their students' lack of interest in poetry study discussed in the next section. In this respect, they may be following a British trend, commented on by Dymoke (2002), who wonders if there is "a legitimate place for poetry writing within an assessment-driven curriculum" (p. 85).

Teaching poetry as a short text: Achievement Standard 1.4

Teacher interviewees such as Helen commented that "teaching students to write essay-type answers for an external assessment on poetry at Year 11 can be time-consuming and a gamble" when compared with the study of the novel, short story and print media, genres generally studied in Years 9 and 10, and continued in Year 11. Another reason raised by Helen and Ron for avoiding poetry is the nature of the topics set at an external examination. Options set to show understanding of two short texts on examination papers for two years were as follows:

- Describe an important character or individual in EACH text. Explain why EACH character is important (2004);
- Describe a challenge faced by a character or individual in EACH text. Explain how the challenge helps you understand EACH text (2004);
- Short texts often surprise the reader. Describe what was surprising in EACH of the texts you have studied. Explain **why** the writer of EACH text used surprise as a feature (2003);
- Explain what you think the author's purpose was in EACH text (2003).

According to both teachers and students, such statements seem to apply better to genres such as short stories than to poems. In one school, George stated that he did prepare his students for both poetry and short story texts "but on the day it is the candidate that makes the choice to suit the question. All my 2004 students chose short story on the day". Another teacher remarked that "Poetry gets choked by other options, such as the short story and print media. Students like these options so poetry is forbidden fruit."

Debbie made an important point. She admitted that she avoided teaching poetry because her students lacked "a working up-to-date vocabulary" which occurred frequently in poems. She added that students found it difficult to "unpack" poems as they were unfamiliar with biblical allusions, references to classical poems, foreign phrases and proverbs.

Unfamiliar texts, 1.6

Achievement Standard 1.6, understanding unfamiliar texts, which is externally assessed and compulsory for those registered for English¹⁸ presents a variety of texts, such as:

- creative or formal written texts including prose, fiction or non-fiction and poetry;
- visual texts, such as a static image, storyboard from a film, a cartoon or image from a magazine;
- oral texts, such as the written transcript of a speech, or a script from a stage or radio play.

It is obvious that this particular question, which expects the study of at least ten different genres, may demand much teaching time to approach the standard at depth, covering every possible genre. It is not known beforehand which texts will be on the paper.

The paper is worth three credits, 60 minutes is allowed to answer it, and achievement criteria suggest how achieve, credit or excellence may be gained in answering the questions. The candidate may answer:

- ten questions at "achievement" level for an achievement result (A).
- six at "achievement" and four at "merit" level for a merit result (A/M).
- six at "achievement" level and four at "excellence" level for an excellence result (A/M/E).

¹⁸ 1.6 is one of the required literacy standards that students must achieve.

Students are reminded that:

- **Achievement** criteria require them to “Show understanding of unfamiliar texts and identify the ideas and/or style and/or language features.”
- Achievement with **Merit** requires them to “Show understanding of unfamiliar texts through explanation of ideas and/or style and/or language features.”
- Achievement with **Excellence** requires them to “Show understanding of unfamiliar texts through explanation and appreciation of ideas and/or style and/or language features.”

The candidate is aware of the level of pass she/he is aiming at. One current student, when interviewed, commented that he “couldn’t see the point of working too hard; ‘Achieve’ is enough when I’m leaving school this year.” This remark was echoed by other students. A teacher also endorsed that this was a common attitude of some students towards their work in the classroom – “and very noticeable in class behaviour with lack of concentration and interest”. In the survey papers from University students such attitudes to “hating” poetry and “couldn’t be bothered paying attention” were obvious. One student commented that “poetry was totally irrelevant to youth’s issues”. Another felt it was “a waste of time, even though it might pop up in a paper” and said “the teacher skipped over it hurriedly” and “we turned off and didn’t listen”.

Examples of poems

Two examples of poems will suffice to illustrate the degree of difficulty expected of students in an external examination situation after what is usually 11 years at school.

Poem: ‘Christmas in Windy Tree City’ (2003 paper)

Every where is lit up
Kirkcaldies flags are flying
little bee people rush along the pavement
surge at the lights
into the stores
with gold and white and red
and green and music CDs
promising a white Christmas.

Christmas
and the Queen’s message
and the Virgin Mary
and even our own saint
bless us.

And car lights so bright
neon, and car indicators and pub lights
and headlights and
the glow of electric Christmas
candles.

And my heart is darker
than the reindeer
pretending to prance
on top of the building
shortly to be demolished
in front of my eyes

in daylight.
Think I'll go rescue my car
from a WCC parking warden.

Remove myself to the beach
where Christmas is a vague concept
having much less influence
than the in and out
of tidal festivals in Windy Tree City.

It's the season.

Note: Kirkcaldies is a large multi-storey department store in Wellington.
WCC is the Wellington City Council.

[Source: 'Christmas in Windy Tree City', Roma Potiki, in *Shaking the Tree*, Steele Roberts, Ltd, 1998]

Examinees were asked to read the article poem and answer these questions:

- a) Explain the meaning of "demolished" (line 23) (A);
- b) Explain the metaphor in "little bee people" (line 3) (A/M/E);
- c) Explain **in your own words** why the poet does not like Christmas. Quote from the poem to support your answer (A/M/E) (NZQA, 2006, p. 34).¹⁹

Teachers commented upon the length of the poem in relation to the substance of the explanations required. Three possible answers to meet the required standards as described in the revision guide for (a), (b) and (c) were:

- a) "Destroyed"; "knocked down" or "dismantled".
- b) "Like bees people are attracted to the bright lights and colours."
"The people are rushing around because of Christmas, and doing their shopping".
"The movement of the people is frenzied in much the same way as bees as they move in and out of the hives to collect pollen".
"People are in a rush".
- c) "The author seems very disenchanted with Christmas. She is mocking it, especially in regards to the lights that appear fake, and is even mocking it regarding the 'Virgin Mary and even our own Saint' (line 11-12)".
"Christmas has become a commercialized notion. The real meaning of Christmas has been lost in the marketing ploys of businesses – e.g. "Kirkcaldies flags are flying" (line 2)".

On the whole teachers felt this poem could be "handled well by the best students". Results indicated grades were "generally" as expected.

The next poem, contained in the 2004 paper was, according to some teachers and several students, more difficult as there were only two questions (instead of the customary three), all referring to the three achievement levels. Worded differently from those given in previous years, these interpretive questions, as one teacher said, "required an understanding of the metaphorical as well as the literal connotations of

¹⁹ A similar format asking questions about "meaning", "metaphor" (or a specific language feature) and "explain in your own words" was used in 2002.

the words beyond the reach of some students". The task also required close reading of a poetry text for which students were not prepared, "nor do we have time to indulge in it, as there are so many other articles to prepare for" commented another teacher. According to the teacher interviewees, students who normally gain "excellence" in this credit gained "achieve" in 2004.

Through lack of time, teachers tended to concentrate upon papers (like the previous years') and upon the examiners' feedback, and rarely taught outside these boundaries. Another reason teachers gave for low achieving in 2004 was the inadequate guidance given by the NZQA about the expected requirements posed by the questions – "if the powers that be want to change the format they need to let us know", commented a teacher. Another teacher wondered about the system of grading when there were hundreds of examiners for English and "there is subjectivity in answering an 'explain' kind of question".

In 2004 the poem was

'Grandpa's Gift' – For Turi

He could really handle money,
my father-in-law, he threw most of it away –
I'd never seen this before.

He fumbled in his pocket, it tumbled out,
note after crumpled note, he'd fill your hand –
what was his was yours;

and I saw to my delight,
he made me understand, the scraps of coloured paper
it truly merely was.

"Rich, eh?" I hear him say, and laugh,
"Not anymore!" Rich all right, that man, in another
currency, richest of all.

[Source: 'Grandpa's Gift', Four Poems, Leonard Lambert, <http://www.book.co.nz/lam.htm>.]

Examinees were asked to read the poem and answer the questions below.

- a) Explain how Grandpa's attitude to money tells you about the kind of person he is. Give evidence from the text to support your answer (A/M/E).
- b) Explain the **link** between the title of the poem (*Grandpa's Gift*) and the meaning of the words "another currency" (lines 11-12.) (A/M/E).

Suggested answers to meet the required standards, according to the revision guide were:

- a) "Grandpa is an unconventional and unusual man because the author says that "I'd never seen this before (line 3)".
"Grandpa believed that money was not important and he helped the author to understand that 'the scraps of coloured paper/it truly merely was (line 8-9)".
- b) "The title is appropriate because grandpa has given the author 'gifts'. Firstly, Grandpa gives him money, yet the most important gift is in 'another

currency,' – his wisdom and insights. Grandpa helps the author realise that money is merely 'scraps of paper'."

The revision guide (editors have access to examiners' reports) gave fewer examples of suggested answers to the second poem. Perhaps it was more difficult to discover different ways of answering question (b). At least one teacher was disappointed that "none of my students gained "excellence" for this standard and only six percent gained "merit", yet I taught as conscientiously as in previous years when the results were vastly different".

Several other Achievement Standards in English have the potential to include poetry in the internally assessed material. But teachers do not encourage students to engage in poetry performance and presentation, as in "Produce a media or Dramatic Performance: 1.8", yet they admit that "the whole class and possibly the teacher would benefit from watching these students who study drama and speech extracurricular. But, there's no time, and what one must do, all must do!" George said he would like to see some poetry in performance but "I'm uncertain how to assess it, even with guidelines". Marilyn added that it is impossible to manage a class if "a few do a poster, some do scenes from a play, others prepare a media presentation, and a two or three give a poetry performance". In classes of 25-35 students and several Year 11 classes, it is more practicable to arrange for all students to choose the same option for both internal and external assessments, teachers believe. They choose what best suits the class – "constructing a short film after analysing one in preparation for 'visual or oral text 1.5' with work sheets from the internet suits my students", said Debbie.

Practically, the comprehensive nature of the assessment programme for English for Year 11 students restricts students to what can best be fitted into the time allowed for English and the competency and resources of the teacher. Restrictions include "relieving teachers who simply 'baby-sit', the varied achievement ability of the students, the timetabling of options to suit the whole school and the interruptions from the many intrusions that encroach upon class time," remarked student Cassie.

Some schools accept that NCEA 1 suits many Year 11 students who, on leaving school at that level (having reached the age of 16) take with them "a piece of paper showing some degree of having achieved something," as Ron says. A few teachers remarked that the brighter students are not challenged sufficiently by NCEA 1, although credits achieved over the required number can be transferred to NCEA 2. All teachers, and especially those who have taught for more than twenty years, felt that NCEA offered too many topics, teachers spent more time assessing than teaching, and left insufficient time to revise, revisit or cover topics at any depth, so that some topics, such as poetry, tended to be excluded or treated perfunctorily.

From the beginning of the year, students at Year 11 are faced with regular assessments to cover internally assessed credits. Penny complained about setting the internally assessed blocks at a certain date "rather than when we and the classes are ready". She expressed the wish that the assessment would develop from work done in class, rather than "having to do a task when the timetable says so!"

Observations made by teachers and educationalists, which I have quoted so far in this article, expose the peripheral nature of poetry teaching in the English programme in secondary schools today. The staff of English teachers at a large school remarked:²⁰ “We do teach poetry, especially at Year 9 and Year 13 where some fabulous work is done.” They were aware that poetic and creative writing required critical thinking, a facility with language and the ability to shape, refine and craft a piece of work – all of which lead to the achievement of close reading, exploring language and interpretive skills required for the study of poetry. “Omit the study of poetry and we are omitting a text that plays a major role in the imaginative development of students, and in stimulating in them the ability to interpret layers of meaning in a brief text. We are condemning them to a narrow range of skill in speaking, writing and reading English”. “But”, they added, “at Year 11 it is impossible to pay full attention to poetry because internal assessing gets in the way.”

ATTITUDES TO POETRY

To discover what students feel about studying poetry, I prepared the following data. Using the same format each time, I asked the university students, the teachers, and the teachers recently trained at the CCE to rate the attitudes of their peers/students to poetry. The university students had a short time to respond, anonymously. The teachers and CCE-trained teachers were sent the survey by mail, and were not asked for names. Four carefully selected alternatives were used to elicit definitive responses: hostile; uninterested; interested; enthusiastic.

It is significant to compare the responses from the three examples of data, which correlate with the material gathered from interviews. Each group (see Table 1) was asked to rate the attitudes of peers/students according to the following four choices: hostile; uninterested; interested; enthusiastic. (Dotted lines and arrows indicate a grading between two/three choices.)

The chart showed that, except in (C), more students were hostile to and uninterested in poetry than were interested. This fact was supported by the comments of both students and teachers.

If creative writing of poetry and the study of poetry itself do not appeal to students, then the poetry option in unfamiliar texts is unlikely to be an easy option as an externally assessed credit. One teacher, Marilyn, in a large school took this supposition further, saying:

If students leave school after Year 11 having avoided poetry study, as they can, they are unlikely to retain an interest in poetry. If students do not enjoy poetry during Year 9, 10 and 11 schooling, they are not likely to favour the study of poetry in Year 12 and 13, and beyond. Much depends upon the enthusiasm of the teacher, his/her pedagogical expertise and the choices of poems.

²⁰ This interview was recorded.

(A) University students: 150			
hostile	uninterested	interested	enthusiastic
2 (plus)			
31			
4			
80			
4			
19			
1 sort of			
9			
(B) Teachers: 58			
hostile	uninterested	interested	enthusiastic
13			
4			
4			
33			
4 reasonably			
2			
2			
Teachers were hesitant in being more precise.			
(C) CCE-trained teachers: 15			
hostile	uninterested	interested	enthusiastic
0			
0			
11 (Seniors/Juniors)			
4 (Juniors)			
Six teachers said seniors were uninterested at first, then interested.			

Table 1. Attitudes to poetry for different samples

The teachers trained at the CCE, however, reported success in awakening an interest in poetry at both junior and senior level. The course described to me by Ronnie Davey, and discussed in the final pages of this article, demonstrates that poetry can be taught effectively. Before doing so, however, I would like to share some comments from former students on the positive effects of having studied poetry while at school.

WHAT MY FORMER STUDENTS SAID

From the survey papers sent to my former students, I received 72 positive replies. The impact that effective poetry teaching made upon their lives and careers was evident from the written responses returned from my former students of all ages concerning experiences in learning and teaching poetry while at school or/and University, and using poetry in their adult vocations. Many of the comments referred to the enjoyment of speaking poems aloud and memorising them, as Tanya said: "Speaking words aloud, sometimes at first sight unknown and unusual words such as those of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Robert Browning, was indeed a challenge for us; and we loved it." Marie who loves music said, "The music of words created by using the speaking voice as an instrument, led to a connection between the self and language." Lois, who now teaches musical theatre, spoke of "Harmonising or counter-balancing each other in saying poems, we came to understanding in our hearts, if not always in our heads."

The artist in Stephanie remembered “Painting pictures with our voices [which] enriched our imaginations.” Marion (who left school at fifteen) entertains her small rural community, and her five children’s children, with poems and stories remembered from school days; “I just love it,” she insisted.

They stated, without hesitation, that poetry contributed to their confidence and competency in written and oral English, led to fulfilling careers, encouraged development in personal and interpersonal relations, and provided social, spiritual and cultural experiences. Between 1949 and now, I have taught 7000 to 8000 students. Many of these I still see regularly or unexpectedly, receive communication from and support on sad or happy occasions. Poetry is always a point of contact between us.

The teaching of poetry as an essential part of the English programme, as it was thirty or more years ago, is still not only a means to better writing and speaking, and a useful pedagogical tool to develop knowledge of self, others, history, nature and teenage issues, but also a primarily indispensable experiential method of learning. Teaching poetry, therefore, as my former students suggested, is a means to an end, and “a way of accessing knowledge, perception and wisdom through experiencing the poems” (Anne).

All these former students of mine surprised and moved me when they wrote about the infinite variety of ways in which poetry played a significant role in their education and later careers and how they, in turn, are influencing others – grandchildren, clients, students and neighbours through their mastery of the spoken, written and visual elements of poetry. I was impressed by examples such as: Jules valuing poetry for keeping our eyes “seeing softly” and as a way of learning “things about myself”; Dianne’s belief that poetry evokes a greater understanding of the human condition, “teaching me who I am and what I believe in”; Michael’s application of the influence of poetry in commerce, when he spoke of “having been pushed beyond my comfort zone to face up to an audience – alone on stage; a scary gamble, until I came to like it, and am now incorporating poetry successfully into my training programmes”.

Fran acknowledged that the arts of persuasion, negotiation and mediation stemmed from higher diploma work in her own speech and drama classes helping secure “the positions of responsibility I wanted because of my communication skills. Performing poetry has unknown spin-offs”. Grant, a boilermaker, was confident now “because I learned to recite and act on stage as a very shy, diffident child” and now can “speak up before my peers and express opinions assertively. Without poetry I would still be in the background, hiding.” Maree mentioned another, and very important dimension to learning and reciting poetry, namely, dealing with stress, as she observed humorously, “When I feel the arteries might be getting clogged I rattle off some poetry, such as ‘The Highwayman’ or ‘Lochinvar’ or one of T.S. Eliot’s ‘Cat’ poems, or sing up and down a scale, to test if everything is in working order.” Hilary, in a similar vein, mentioned wryly: “I shall be grateful for all the poetry I have learned if I am stuck in a prison sometime!”

We had a curriculum and these students sat examinations at Years 9 to 13 – as long as they stayed at school – but poetry was taught holistically and enthusiastically at every level. I believe, after reading these testimonies, that without poetry at Years 9-11, students of this generation will not have the same facility with language, nor use it

with confidence in their professional and employment opportunities as the students of fifty years ago did, and still do.

BREAKING THE CYCLE

My data showed that the cycle of deprivation can be broken if strategies are set in place to ensure that the multi-layered and positive approach to the teaching of poetry fifty years ago and the rich and holistic concept now taught at the Christchurch (NZ) College of Education (CCE) can be used to teach written, oral and visual language in line with the principles of the New Zealand curriculum for the teaching of English. Students can achieve higher grades, such as merit and excellence, for NCEA Level 1 in Achievement Standards 1.1, 1.4 and 1.6 if more teachers put poetry in its rightful place in the programme for English in Year 9 classrooms.

Educating the teachers at the CCE

Having heard of the teacher education course at the CCE, I asked Ronnie Davey, a teacher educator, if I could observe her first semester course to find out how teachers of English are prepared for the classroom. Five weeks of observation and my interviews with Davey and the graduate student-teachers provided the material for this section.

EN311, a course for graduate students who want to teach English as one of their subjects, is an example of a particular approach to teaching English at post-primary level holistically through poetry. This course is conducted annually at the Christchurch College of Education, New Zealand, open to students from any region in New Zealand as well as from outside New Zealand. The class usually consists of about 20 students with a pre-requisite of English 200 level²¹. There are four semesters in which are included four opportunities for observation and teaching practice in post-primary schools throughout New Zealand. Students enroll in this course and also enroll in at least one other subject, for example, English and Drama, English and Physical Education.

EN311 occupies six hours of class time per week – two-hour sessions on each of three days. Working with poetry and applying the activities to learning and teaching various aspects of the curriculum, Davey focuses the student-teachers' attention upon strategies for using the curriculum to advantage. A three-pronged approach to poetry is proposed as (a) being valuable in the development of language; (b) exploring the visual nature of poetry; (c) using technology to examine poetry. Davey provides plenty of examples of barrier-breaking activities and strategies for promoting and maintaining involvement from the class. These activities are modelled during the course.

The overall course structure is as follows:

Block One focuses on *ENZC* and pedagogies in English and literacy, using poetry as a microcosm for oral, written and visual language, the writing process, and the uses of ICTs.

²¹ A student must have completed English papers at both first and second-year level.

Block Two develops the theory behind *ENZC* by focusing on reading and related theoretical and practical issues, such as reader response, critical literacy and gender and “low progress” issues, assessment and NCEA examinations.

Block Three returns to practical teaching methods focusing on oracy, drama, and Shakespeare as literature and drama.

Block Four draws the threads together and advises on long-term planning, transitions into teaching, completed assignments and on any individual needs or gaps.

The plan for teaching English in this course at the CCE highlights poetry as a means of affirming “the importance of literature for literacy development, for imaginative development and for developing personal, social, cultural, historical and national awareness and identity” (Course description). The course work aims to illustrate how poetry is a valid tool for teaching the written, oral and visual aspects of English at every level, dynamically, practically and in terms of sound pedagogy. The course is a microcosm of the teaching of English according to *ENZC*. The programme, the activities and the ongoing requirements from the students, and the strategies and resources necessary for successful teaching and learning, mirror in the first five weeks the achievement objectives that, as teachers, the students are expected to cover for Year 9 to 13 students for the teaching of oral, written and visual language. As I attended only the first block of the course, I shall confine my comments to that particular period of the course.

Ongoing requirements and activities included the reading of relevant professional material, the major curriculum document and support documents, texts, journal articles and resources containing materials that inform the current philosophies and practice of teaching English. Participants were expected to read a wide range of adolescent fiction and non-fiction texts, to attend to journal writing, to use STUDENTNET²² as well as to set and achieve their own goals. Full attendance, punctuality, and active participation in all class activities were essential to fulfill the course. Students were also given an overview of significant theoretical approaches to teaching literature, including the reader response approach. All of this was set up in the first week.

The course was structured as student-centred and inclusive teaching. Each two-hour period involved listening, writing, practical work solo and in small or full groups with constant reference to curriculum material. Such pedagogy modeled future lesson-planning. Using poetry as a model for teaching in the first block, placed it as a dominating force to intersect with every other aspect of the course. Ways of highlighting learning and foreshadowing the next lesson led to well-structured lesson planning for the future. While actively engaged in doing, the students were learning how, why and when to use these strategies, and what material to use to teach the oral, written and visual strands of the curriculum.

Interviews with the students

That poetry can be taught holistically and dynamically at all levels is clearly possible from the comments of the student-teachers. Much seems to depend upon the attitude, resourcefulness and determination of a teacher, according to R who, although she had

²² A web site for the students at the CCE with resources, messages from teachers, extra lecture notes and other relevant information.

been educated in Canada, found: "New Zealand literature exciting and relevant for today's teens. I believe a teacher can find ways of incorporating poetry into units of work through pedagogical strategies, in spite of obstacles, to keep it alive and sought after by the students."

After observation periods at schools in Christchurch, student-teachers reported experiences that varied with the type of school where each was placed. M observed a "slow streamed Year 9 class" at a school with a roll of 1200 boys. She said that "the boys thought it was 'not cool' to like poetry or do well at school, preferring not to know the answers". However, she described some attempts at creative writing of poetry "showed promise, but the students were reluctant to show them to the class for fear of ridicule". Her associate teacher did varied small activities to keep the boys on track, but felt poetry was "a lost cause with these boys". M's second section was also with a Year 9 class but at a co-educational school of 500 students. She reported that "these students were keen; created poems and shaped them. They were working on folios which would contain two limericks, three haiku and a free verse poem". M discovered that her associate teacher there had trained at the CCE four years previously, and regretted she had so little time to spend on the poetry folios.

Another student-teacher, L, spoke of a satisfying experience with a Year 10 class at an all-girls' school. The class had seen the film, *Dead Poets' Society*, and L was invited to introduce a unit created from the poems referred to in the film. She reported that, "Some excellent in-depth study resulted from this unit". The teacher invited L to take over the class during her time on section, and commended her quality of teaching.

Not all students observed poetry units in progress. F spoke of her "disastrous attempt" with a Year 10 class to introduce "pair work and pair evaluation of poetry games". T also spoke of working with Year 12 students who were "hostile to poetic writing and hated analysing poems". He remarked that "when I showed them how to scaffold the process, the students turned out some excellent work".

Comments such as the above indicate that little poetry is taught in schools, and when it is taught the emphasis at Year 9 level is upon an understanding of types of poems such as limerick and haiku. At Year 10, students may meet a sonnet for the first time, but are introduced merely to the format of the poem. At Year 11 at most schools, Year 9 and 10 work is revised to deal with terminology questions in the external unfamiliar texts standard, 1.6. However, teachers passionate about using poetry to teach English can make a difference, as some of these student-teachers demonstrated.

Student-teachers offered comments upon the attitudes of their associate teachers to the teaching of poetry. K noticed that the teachers in an all boys' school saw poetry as "hard to teach and ... not worth spending time on". Her associate teacher said poetry "as a unit produced no noticeable reward or profitable outcome". Three other student-teachers in the group I interviewed endorsed this attitude from their experiences in other schools. P said "it's not only in boys' schools that students at years 10 and 11 hate poetry".

After their final classes on section, when student-teachers were given more control of the class, several of them reported that much seemed to depend upon the approach of

the teacher. M observed, “A new teacher coming in for a few well-prepared lessons gets a different response from the class than does the regular teacher” who has to cover the curriculum prescription in a set time “with unwelcome interruptions and varied behaviour patterns, day after day”.

I concluded from the student-teachers' remarks that they believed a passion for poetry, a well-prepared lesson to suit the particular class and a resource kit of strategies and methods for teaching poetry can capture and hold the attention of a class. I realised also that their observations in the classrooms correlated with the picture I had gained from reading the survey papers returned from more experienced teachers, and from interviews.

CCE-trained teachers

The fifteen teachers I surveyed who had been trained at the CCE were still able to teach English using poetry as a microcosm, but with varying degrees of success. These teachers were also employed to teach other subjects such as drama, media studies and journalism. They referred to the CCE course as “extremely helpful, effective and enjoyable” (Amelia) and “I continue to use all the resources and ideas in all classes since 2002” (Nerissa). These teachers observed that poetry classes were successful with Year 9 students, moderately so with Year 10 students “depending upon the particular class and their previous experiences”. Some stated that they “struggled” with Year 11 students because “students find short stories easier to cover in the time available” (Sarah) and “in our school poetry is not taught at Year 11 – and that’s that!” (Ben).

Astute observations from these teachers, just as they were from more experienced teachers, centred upon the fact that English is an assessment-driven course, so techniques for studying poetry for 1.6 are taught but “poetry is not taught for poetry’s sake”. One teacher commented that “NCEA has made poetry teaching more clinical because of the teaching + assessment + teaching + assessment-rushed timetable”. Student-teachers spoke also of “literature missing out” and that the poetry taught “is not conducive to the kinds of questions asked in the external assessments. Sadly, teachers seem to fit the material taught to specific questions, rather than preparing students for whatever question might be asked.”

A parallel to the philosophy behind the CCE course is found in an article by Cheryl L. Rosaen (2003) in “Preparing teachers for diverse classrooms: Creating public and private spaces to explore culture through poetry writing”. In this article, Rosaen relates her efforts “as a teacher educator to transform [her] own curriculum, teaching and assessment practices to better prepare beginning teachers”. Her research arose from “a demographic imperative to serve an increasingly diverse population of school-age children” using poetry writing as a site for “engaging teacher candidates in learning about themselves as cultural beings” (p. 1456). Her conclusions quoted responses from 12 teacher candidates who “reframed their thinking about whether and how poetry can be used as a pedagogical tool to develop knowledge of self, knowledge of others and understanding and appreciation of literature” (p. 1467). In her interview with me, Davey spoke of the course as

a means of a student-teacher’s integration of past and present knowledge to reveal understanding of self, others, English language and literature, deeper thinking about

learning and learners, teaching and teachers, refining and developing beliefs, attitudes and expectations in a constructive way through poetry reading, writing and speaking.

Adding on a note of hope, “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.”²³

CONCLUSION

Students trained at the CCE and in courses like it are developing ways to break down barriers to liking and learning poetry, and of catching the attention of the students with relevant poems and creative, purposeful activities. Working with poems challenges the class to explore them orally, or with written language or dramatically, in group or solo, and in creative ways in order to teach English holistically in line with *ENZC* and in preparation for NCEA. However, these teachers are few in number.

Poetry in schools, in general, is often left to the discretion of the teacher and the ability of the class. But poetry is not only for the top streamed students.²⁴ All students “can come to grips with language features and an understanding of the ‘right’ poems”, averred Scott, a fourth-year, CCE-trained teacher, who makes “great use of rap in class”. While poetry teaching, according to my research, appears to be dictated to by the nine Achievement Standards for NCEA Level I English, Davey’s “leaven” is stirring and beginning to exert pressure on “the whole lump”.

In the first chapter of *The crafty reader* (2001), Robert Scholes begins by quoting from Arnold Bennett long, 1909 essay, “Literary taste: How to form it”:

There is a word, a “name of fear”, which rouses terror in the heart of the vast educated majority of the English-speaking race. The most valiant will fly at the mere utterance of that word. The most broad-minded will put their backs up against it. The most rash will not dare affront it. I myself have seen it empty buildings that have been full; and I know that it will scatter a crowd more quickly than a hose-pipe, hornets, or the rumour of a plague. Even to murmur it is to incur solitude, probably disdain, and possibly starvation, as historical examples show. That word is “poetry” (Bennett, 1909, cited by Scholes, 2001, p. 1).

Scholes goes on to say that, although Bennett was, perhaps, exaggerating a little, English teachers, including Scholes himself, are teaching and studying poetry less, “and when it is taught it is seldom taught effectively” (2001, p. 6). Scholes emphasises the contribution poetry makes “to our lives as individuals and our society”. He continues: “[Poetry] offers us textual pleasure in its formal qualities ... expressive pleasure, in that it expresses our concerns and situations ... and because of its memorability and brevity it is a powerful medium of communication ... and sometimes, even, a means of persuasion” (2001, p. 6).

Louise Rosenblatt, who specialised in comparative literature and literary theory, also writes of a response to poetry through synthesising sound, rhythm, image and idea vocally, urging teachers “to keep alive this view of [a poem] as personal evocation,

²³ 1 Corinthians 5:6.

²⁴ Some schools place in the “top” classes the students who have the highest grades from diagnostic tests such as Performance Achievement Tests (PATs) and Standard Tests for Achievement in Reading (STAR).

the product of creative activity carried on by the reader under the guidance of the text....The reader performs the poem...as the violinist performs the sonata. But the instrument...from which he performs the work – is himself” (1995, p. 266).

That poetry can be taught holistically and dynamically at all levels is clearly possible. Much seems to depend upon the attitude, resourcefulness and determination of the teacher who can incorporate poetry into units of work even in small ways, in spite of obstacles, to keep it alive and sought after by the students. Obstacles set up by a seemingly assessment-driven curriculum will not, I hope, deter effective teachers from implementing the pedagogical strategies they have hopefully assimilated in their training, and from converting the diffident.

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APPENDIX 1**Copy of Survey: teachers of English, 24 March 2004**

Please tick, or fill in the spaces appropriately:

School: Private ___ State ___ Integrated ___ Co-educational ___ Single sex _____

- 1) (a)Teacher: HOD ___ Full time ___ Part time ___ Relieving ___
 (b)Specialist in English only ___ Non-specialist in English _____
 (c)English and other subject/s (please name) _____
- 2) Qualifications in English _____
- 3) Other qualifications _____
- 4) Years of experience teaching English to:
 - a) Year 9 students _____
 - b) Year 10 students _____
 - c) Year 11 students _____
 - d) Other _____
 - e) Total _____
- 5) Estimated proportion of time per term given to teaching poetry to:
 - a) Year 9 students _____
 - b) Year 10 students _____
 - c) Year 11 students _____
 - d) Other _____
- 6) Kinds of poetry taught at each level (e.g. Wordsworth; sonnets; war poets etc.)
 - a) Year 9 students _____
 - b) Year 10 students _____
 - c) Year 11 students _____
 - d) Other _____
- 7) Degree of interest shown by students **in general** (please circle):
 a. hostile; b. uninterested; c. interested; d. enthusiastic.
 Comments: _____

- 8) What are your reasons for teaching poetry as an integral part of the English programme? _____

- 9) What do you think are the barriers to teaching poetry as an integral part of the English programme? _____

10) To what degree do you think the curriculum advocates the importance of teaching poetry as an integral part of the English programme? _____

11) How positive do you feel your students are in approaching questions about poetry in NCEA 1? Why? _____

12) How satisfactory have you found the results from NCEA 1 examinations with regard to poetry questions? Why? _____

13) Any other comments, suggestions or clarifications? (You may continue over the page if you wish) _____

Many thanks for taking the time to respond to this survey. Sister Leonie O'Neill.

APPENDIX 2**Copy of Survey: students enrolled in English 102, University of Canterbury, 24 March 2004.**

For my PhD I am examining the place of poetry in the teaching of English in the New Zealand curriculum. I would be grateful if you would take a few minutes to complete this survey to contribute to my research. I would appreciate responses from **all students in 102**, whether you have just left school or otherwise.

Please answer those questions which apply to you, or simply write N.A.

1. In which **year** did you complete school? _____
2. At which **level** did you finish school? _____
3. Was the teaching of poetry a **regular** part of the English programme?

4. What kinds of poetry did you study? (E.g. Wordsworth; war poets; sonnets etc)

5. At which level/s (class/es) was poetry taught? _____
6. Did you enjoy studying poetry? _____
7. Why? _____
8. On a scale of 1-4 (1=hostile; 2=uninterested; 3=interested; 4=enthusiastic) what was the general attitude of your peers to poetry? _____
9. Did you choose to do poetry for internal and external assessments? Why?

10. Did you write poetry in class? _____
11. Was the poetry that you wrote assessed? If so, how? _____
12. Do you at present: a. read poetry? _____ b. write poetry? _____
c. enjoy poetry? _____ d. study poetry? _____
13. Do you feel confident about studying poetry in English 102?

14. Any further comments? _____

Many thanks for helping me with my research. Please return the survey to your lecturer.

Best wishes for a successful University year.

Helen J. O'Neil (Sister Leonie).

APPENDIX 3

Sister Leonie O’Neill
 56 Caledonian Road
 St Albans, Christchurch

Ph: (03) 366 4460

Email: hjn14@student.canterbury.ac.nz

As you may have heard – those of you I see occasionally will have heard – I am in the final stages of completing a PhD at University of Canterbury in 2006.

My thesis title at the moment is:

“Once preferred, now peripheral; the place of poetry in the teaching of English in the New Zealand curriculum for Years 9, 10 and 11 year students”
 (the previous forms 3, 4 and 5 classes).

As part of my research, I am including a personal account of my own experiences in teaching, adjudicating, examining and encouraging students in the speaking, reading, writing and study of poetry over the years. I would, therefore, be very grateful if you would kindly complete the enclosed survey paper for me – *as far as you can*.

Copy of Survey. Please answer in whatever form you wish.

- 1) Name:
- 2) Address:
 - a. Phone/email:
 - b. Name that I may use in thesis: (e.g. 1st name, pseudonym):
- 3) Present and/or previous Occupation/s:
- 4) Age: (e.g. 20+, 25, 33, 40+, 51, 66 etc.)
- 5) Experience with poetry & at what age:
 - a. speech and drama lessons;
 - b. literature in school;
- 6) Memories of poetry speaking, studying, reading, writing
- 7) Value of having been taught poetry: in your work/in the family/in general etc.
- 8) Your views on the teaching (or non-teaching) of poetry in schools today (you may have children or grandchildren).
- 9) Anything else you wish to contribute? (Please use back of page if you wish.)

Many thanks for answering this survey. I appreciate your comments.

Sister Leonie

APPENDIX 4**Copy of Survey: CCE Trainee Teachers, September 2005**

(Please return to Sister Leonie, 56 Caledonian Road, Christchurch).

(a) Your Name to use in my thesis: (pseudonym; initials etc.)

(No school name will be mentioned)

(b) Your email?

(c) Address: _____

1. How did the first five weeks at the CCE help you to take a class, lesson or part of a lesson according to the English curriculum? At what level?
2. Did you *observe* poetry teaching in a class, either teaching a poem as **short text**, or in preparation for the **unfamiliar text** question, or **other**? What level?
3. Were you able to take a class, part of a lesson or lesson using poetry or poetic techniques? What level? Which strand? Which function?
4. In relation to 3, how successful or otherwise was your teaching? Class interest? Class response? If not, why not?
5. Did you see evidence of poetry being **important** in the English class? What? How? How much? At which level/s?
6. If you were not able to use one or some of the methods proposed in Davey's class, why not? Was it the class attitude or the teacher's approach?
7. If you were able to present a successful lesson, would that same lesson be successful in your other section? Why?
8. Anything to add? You do not need to keep to these questions. Feel free to respond in any way on the back of the survey paper, if you wish.

Thank you so much

Sister Leonie

APPENDIX 6**Copy of Letter/survey: teachers formerly trained at the CCE, October 2005**

I am engaged in working on a PhD thesis: "Once preferred, now peripheral: the place of poetry in the teaching of English in the New Zealand Curriculum for Years 9, 10 and 11". In the first term of 2005, I observed Ronnie Davey's course on using poetry as a microcosm for teaching English. I have used material from that course in my thesis. I also interviewed some of the students during the course and after their sections in schools.

My supervisors, Elody Rathgen and David Gunby, agree with me that it would be interesting to discover if those who attended Ronnie's course in 2001 and 2002 (or years before and after those, depending upon replies) are still teaching English, and at what level/s. Ronnie kindly gave me your name as someone whom I should contact.

Would you be kind enough to complete the enclosed survey and return it to me in the stamped addressed envelope, or, if you prefer it, email your answers.

I would appreciate your contribution.

Copy of Survey on Teaching of Poetry

Please reply with a brief answer or place a tick or cross on the appropriate line.

Name _____ Address: _____

a. Phone: _____ Email: _____

b. Name or initial etc. to use in my thesis, if needed _____

c. What year were you at CCE? _____

d. Type of school (& decile) taught at: private _____ state _____ integrated _____ s. sex
b's _____ g's _____ co-ed. _____ Roll over 1000 _____ roll between 500/999 _____
roll under 500 _____

1. Level/s teaching: 9 _____ 10 _____ 11 _____ 12 _____ 13 _____
2. Qualifications/papers in English: _____ Others: _____
3. Other subjects taught by you: _____
4. Hours per week/month/term spent on teaching (approximate):
English _____ Poetry _____
5. Attitude of class/es to poetry (in general):
Enthusiastic: _____ Interested: _____ Uninterested _____ Hostile _____
6. Any comment: _____
7. How effective & helpful was the course Ronnie Davey presented in term _____ one of
the CCE course, **your** opinion?

8. Have you been able to teach English through poetry?
9. How successfully?
10. At what levels? Why?
11. Has NCEA made a difference to the teaching of poetry? How?
12. Any further comments on any of the above?

Many thanks. Sister Leonie.