

Editorial: *Arts poetica* and the 21st-century English/literacy classroom

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The purpose of poetry is to remind us
how difficult it is to remain one person,
for our house is open; there are no keys in the doors,
and invisible guests come in and out at will.

Czeslaw Milosz

Since the inception of English as a discrete subject in schools (cf. Protherough, 1983), poetry has continued to occupy a central place in the pre-active curriculum (Goodson, 1994), alongside fiction, drama, non-fiction and an increasingly diverse range of textual and language experiences. Poetry may have maintained its iconic status in the versions of subject English that are manifested in, for example, syllabus documents and public examinations; but the pedagogy associated with the teaching of poetry and its reception in the classroom have often thrown into relief the apparent dichotomy between the value of poetry as “a living form of experience” (Whitehead, 1977, p. 94) that “makes possible the deepest kind of personal possession of the world” (Dickey, 1985, p. 3) and the extent of students’ resistance to it in classroom settings. In their 1970s research into young people’s reading interests in the United Kingdom, Whitehead, Capey and Maddren (1975) reported the strong and consistent degree of student antipathy to poetry: reading poetry, analysing poetry and writing about poetry as part of their studies in English. Almost a decade earlier, Whitehead (1966) had observed that:

with extraordinarily few exceptions, children never read poetry, except in the classroom. In this, of course, they are far from being unique. (They are perhaps not even dissimilar from the majority of teachers.) ...This regulation of poetry to the utmost periphery of normal human activity has become so much part of the accepted fabric of our own society...the average child’s out-of-school contacts with anything dimly resembling poetry are astonishingly scanty. (pp. 93-94)

Although Whitehead et al’s research was conducted more than 40 years ago, in a pre-digital age, their findings about students’ aversion to poetry and the study of poetry have been re-iterated and extended in consequent research studies (cf. Bunbury, 1995; Gallagher, 2009; Hall & Coles, 1999). Manuel and Robinson’s (2002) research study of the reading practices and preferences of Australian teenagers, for instance, found that the reading and study of poetry was ranked last in the range of least preferred activities in English (p. 76) Similarly, Manuel’s (2012) research with Australian teenagers (11-18 years), concluded that:

Reading poetry is almost universally unpopular with this age-group. No other category of reading experience rated as poorly in terms of a least preferred activity. The findings here tend to confirm the poor standing of poetry reading with adolescents, perhaps as a result of the reductionist pedagogy that has traditionally

accompanied the “teaching” of poetry: the quarrying of poetry for its figurative language and devices, answering sets of banal questions on worksheets, and drawing it all together, typically, in an analytical essay response. To the detriment of engagement and satisfying experiences with poetry, such pedagogy can seriously undermine students’ attitudes and longer-term predilections through pedagogy which, as John Dewey described it, “mistakes the map for the territory”. (p. 28)

This reticence, if not antipathy, on the part of students can be set along the attitudes of teachers. For teachers, it is not so much a dislike of poetry, though this can be found often enough, as a reluctance to teach poetry in the context of curriculum and assessment regimes, which have become increasingly standardised, prescriptive and reductive (Dymoke, 2012). In Benton’s 1998 study of English teachers in England, around 70% of teachers saw the reading and discussion of poetry as “very important”, while 54% rated the writing of poetry as “very important” (1999, pp. 524, 528). However, what concerned these teachers in 1998 were examinations, time pressures and syllabus content (1999, p. 529). In Year 11, 67% of teachers “rarely” or “never” asked pupils to write a poem (2000, p. 89). Benton’s study and others (e.g., Locke, 2008) confirm Andrews’ claim that that “many of the disempowering approaches to the teaching of poetry...are the result of having to teach within the requirements of an assessment system” (1991, p. 5).

However, all is not necessarily doom and gloom. In a special issue of LEARNING Landscapes on “Poetry and Education: Possibilities and Practices”, there are contributors who have moved beyond the weary, stale, flat and unprofitable to new ways of approaching the teaching of poetry. For example, Patrick Dias (2010) writes that:

Instead of following a path from basic information (difficult words, references, background information) to the key issues the poem addresses, readers need to be communing with the poem as a whole, sounding and hearing the words, attentive to the feelings they stir in us, the images that take us unawares. (p. 23)

In the same collection, Sean Wiebe (2010) describes an approach to teaching poetry, viewed as a creative engagement where a sense of self can be recovered and the world can be defamiliarised. In his approach he links the process of poetry inquiry with a/r/tography, because “when engaging poetically in the classroom students find links, make connections, and develop ideas” through the application of artistic processes and a variety of representational resources (p. 241).

Against the backdrop of decades of research on the precarious place of poetry in the English classroom, and in the context of the contemporary proliferation of standardised, external, high-stakes testing regimes, this special issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* draws together current international research findings and perspectives on the state of poetry in the 21st century classroom. The papers and narratives here cohere around the question: what place does poetry have in our English or literacy classroom? What do students think of poetry? How have their attitudes developed or changed over time? Is poetry an outmoded form of expression, resting high on a pedestal, unseen and seldom encountered except in an examination? Is it a text to be quarried for techniques? Or is it a vibrant, multi-modal medium which students want to slam, tweet, mash-up and revitalise through their use of digital

media both at home and at school? Where does the form feature in school curricula and assessment regimes? Is there a distinct pedagogy for teaching poetry? How do teachers and teacher educators experiment with the challenges of writing or performing poetry?

In addressing these questions, a common thread woven throughout this issue is the authors' alarm and concern at the increasingly deleterious impact of standardised testing on the engagement with and the teaching, writing and assessment of poetry as "both natural and enjoyable" (Whitehead, 1966, p. 94). While Hennessy and Mannix McNamara critique the impact of performativity and exam-driven pedagogy on teachers' and, consequently, students' experience of poetry, Locke addresses the under-researched field of assessing student poetry – again within the context of an educational landscape that is increasingly constrained for both teachers and students in terms of the ever-narrowing space for authentic creative and imaginative endeavours. Based on the findings of a case study conducted in a New Zealand school, Locke offers a series of reflections on the "problem" of pedagogy in the effective engagement of students – the need for a shared and explicit critical literary discourse and knowledge base for English teachers, and the imperative for all English teachers to be active, confident writers themselves, modeling the kind of creative and imaginative life that they seek to encourage in their students. In their attention to the questions of effective pedagogy of teaching and assessing poetry, these papers cogently argue for the continued significance and relevance of poetry as a valued textual form, developing students' capacities in writing, reading, critical thinking, imaginative acumen and personal satisfaction.

On the place and significance of poetry in the formal English curriculum in the 21st century, Carter explores the extent to which the poetics and epistemic assumptions of the Romantic period in English literature have been appropriated and inscribed in versions of senior secondary English in New South Wales, Australia. This paper historicises not only the enduring presence of poetry as a textual form in the English syllabus, but also argues that a Romantic *ars poetica* has been formative in the substance and identity of subject English in New South Wales for more than a century.

Naylor similarly addresses the question of the place of poetry in the contemporary classroom through a focus on the prescribed formal curriculum. This paper investigates the current and historical dimensions of the proposed revisions to the National Curriculum in English for GCSE in England, arguing that the proposed narrowing of prescribed poetry to a single literary, historical period is both potentially limiting and runs counter to the goal of offering students a rich, expansive and authentic experience of engagement with poetry.

In their narratives, both Sams, as a teacher educator working in the United States, and Ortells, as an EFL teacher in Spanish schools, provide compelling insights into the ways in which teachers seek to engage students in meaningful ways with poetry through transformative pedagogy – the kind of pedagogy that encourages each student to *feel* poetry, such that "when you really feel it, a new part of you happens, or an old part is renewed, with surprise and delight at being what it is" (Dickey, 1985, p. 5).

The article in dialogue from Lin and Wang is situated in the Taiwanese context and explores a topic of relevance to L1 as well as L2 instruction around writing. This qualitative study investigates college students' experiences with and perceptions of integrating both the Google.doc and peer e-tutors into an English writing course. The tutors here employed online collaborative learning mechanisms with an attempt to develop students' English writing skills and motivation over the course of one year. The majority of students were found to demonstrate positive attitudes towards using this online writing system and were satisfied with their meaningful interactions with peer e-tutors, with the on-line tutoring activity enhancing their English writing skills. Using Google.docs, however, posed certain challenges including the occasional loss of data and an accidental lag that occurred during the course of writing online.

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