Thinking and writing: students, creativity and poetry

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This keynote...

Focuses on recent research exploring young people’s development as creative and critical writers of/about poetry.

Draws on reflections on my own poetry education, my work as a poet and 21st century adolescent writers’ poetry workshop experiences to consider responses to creative opportunities.

Explores some of the creative challenges faced by KS3, GCSE and A level students and their teachers.

Offers some research-informed practical suggestions for you to adapt for use in your own English classrooms.
Let’s start with a poem or two…

• When I was a Boy by Liz Berry from: *Black Country*, Chatto, 2014
• Roaming Range by Sue Dymoke from: *What They Left Behind*, Shoestring Press, 2018
Roaming range

You roamed wherever your bikes took you
where blackberries grew big and juicy
on railway cuttings, river banks, sunny field edges
where ploughs skirted hedgerows
where bedraggled ribbons mixed
with a must of grass clippings and wreath remnants
heaped near the graveyard tap
where rabbits scuttled into siding burrows
and conkers, released from spiked flails,
geamed on rutted pathways
where out-of-sight cross-country runners
slowed to a smoking stroll
where a nettle’s sting was only
partly eased by spit-rub of dock leaf
where tadpoles jellied in deep ponds
and bluebells chimed silent songs
under greening beeches
where hair snared in thickets
goose grass stuck to jumpers
brambles snagged anoraks
in dank misting twilight
where nobody knew where you were
but home was a quick ride away
when the lure of bangers and mash
became too strong to resist.
Poetry is a creative thinking tool, enabling...

- Developing understanding of self/identities
- Developing awareness of contexts, situations or the wider world
- Detailed exploration of tiny moments, events, compressed ideas
- A focus on the charged nature of individual words
- New ways of seeing, hearing, feeling through unexpected word combinations and language juxtapositions
- Risk taking
Personal reflections on my creative/critical learning

The Moon

*The moon is dark and silent and always still.*

*There are rocks upon her surface like a hill.*

*There are craters and sand there. Beware astronaut beware.*

Sue Dymoke

The first piece of writing I can remember making aged 7. The conditions, the choices available, the poetry-rich environment of the state infant school I attended made this all possible.
Personal reflections on my creative/critical learning

‘to seek out strange new worlds... new life and new civilisations, to boldly go where no (one) has gone before’
River of Experience Exemplar (Dymoke 2017) (Irish/Northern Irish SCOTENs funded research project on Teachers’ Confidence in Teaching Post-16 poetry)

The River draws on an approach developed by Gabrielle Cliff Hodges to explore young people’s reading.
“Teaching kids to read and write should be an artistic event. Instead, many teachers transform these experiences into a technical event, into something without emotions, without creativity - but with repetition. Many teachers work bureaucratically when they should work artistically.”

Paulo Freire (1985)
What could we mean by the term ‘creativity’?

Creativity is …
the ability to see relationships where none exist (Disch n.d.)

…to make connections between previously unconnected ideas (Koestler 1964)

Creativity is essentially a form of problem-solving… a special type of problem solving for which there are no easy answers (Moran 1988)

Creativity involves adaptability and flexibility of thought (Moran 1988)

Creativity is the essence of learning itself… Creative imagination is not a by product of our interactions with the world but the basis of them (Smith 1984)

Creativity consists largely of rearranging what we know to find out what we don’t know (Kneller 1965)

Fostering creativity depends on practitioners being creative to provide the ethos for enabling children’s creativity (Craft 2005)
Criticality can be developed through shared creative practices...

Teachers should play the game of poetry too - not just be the referee:

• ‘Teachers encourage… writing by writing it themselves; unless teachers do that they are tailor’s dummies in a nudist colony - very bad manners’ (Stibbs 1981)

• ‘Children need to know that adults too, struggle with words’ (Nicholls 1990)
Shared creative practices...

Poets talk about poems they have read, listened to and sometimes about lines they have drafted. They sometimes share work in progress when they feel they might benefit from another view. Sometimes they write poems together...

Shared creative practices...

• By reading, listening and viewing a wide range of poetry YOU (and your students) will gain more ideas about what YOU can write about

• Take a precious, quiet moment to think whenever you see or hear a new poem for the first time - it can only ever happen once.

• **Make sure your students are given those precious moments too.**
Some research on young people’s development as creative and critical writers of/about poetry

• Wilson and Dymoke (2017)

More broadly on writing development:
• https://www.arvon.org/learning/teachers-as-writers/
• Andrews and Smith (2011)
• Cremin (2006)
• Grainger, Goouch and Lambirth (2005)
Key issues (1)

Contexts:

• Importance of acknowledging/supporting different contexts where writing can develop and the impact of these various contexts on how students perceive poetry (Wilson and Dymoke 2017, Dymoke 2012)

• Writing poetry is a socially contextualised practice involving collaboration with others (Wilson and Dymoke 2017)
Key issues

Does this reflect the reality of how poetry is written?

Chatterton (1752-70): Henry Wallis, 1856

*Even the poetic world is social* Bakhtin (1981: 300)
Key Issues (2)

Ownership of learning:

• Students develop as writers/performers of poetry if they are increasingly autonomous, able to make their own choices of subject, form, voice, language (Dymoke 2017, 2009, 2003)

• Students develop as readers/listeners if they are able to experience a wide range of possibilities with poetry, are able to make their own selections, are able to listen to and see poetry as more than texts in a school anthology (2017, 2000)
Adolescent writers’ poetry workshop experiences (1)

  - activities on writing with all kinds of rhyming words and structures (Andy Craven-Griffiths)
  - Poetry about Maths & Physics, poetry as discourse (Jane Bluett)
  - Gothic poetry (Brenda Ainsley)
  - School slams (Christopher Parton)
  - Workshop approaches (Cliff Yates, Mandy Coe)
Adolescent writers’ poetry workshop experiences (2): Students and spoken word

My city weeps in shadows and longs for kites that will not fly in its sullen helicopter skies. (Yr 11 student)

Let them know what you have become
How the white plasticine with hips
Turned into an unique colourful figure you call yourself (Yr 11 student)

I'm gonna learn to play the game
I'm trying to bounce from the bottom to the top of the league....
Not a wasteman that lives in a wasteland. (Yr 7 student)

That's why I'm practising my English, so I can't be an alien (Yr 10 student)

I am made of words beyond silence. (Yr 12 student)

Spoken word composed by students involved in year long spoken word education programmes [from Dymoke (2017) ‘Poetry is not a special club’: how has an introduction to the secondary Discourse of Spoken Word made poetry a memorable learning experience for young people? Oxford Review of Education http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03054885.2016.1270200]
from: Hiraeth (Yr13 student)

I was so, so alive.
Oceans of russet-tipped grasses rippled, dancing to the beat of the wind’s drum.
Nothing broke my copper sea then, With its gentle beaches of green.

Stoic stones stood stock still, Heroic in their trial of time, Standing defeated yet untouched, my heart left among those ruins....

Oh, where do I long to be? The curse of hiraeth I reckon, remained where I had been so, so alive.

from: I am a watcher (Year 8 student)

I am always watching. I am a pedestrian, Glancing over when you aren’t looking, I am a tall tree, Looking over you, I am a cloud, observing from afar, I am lost in what you do, how you act, I am cold, shaking with anxiety afraid you’ll glance over...

from my writing workshops with students in 2018
Creative challenges to consider when working with KS3 students

- Where and how does poetry fit into your KS3 curriculum?
- Is it a one-off unit at some stage in KS3 or is poetry included in different ways throughout KS3?
- How often do you refresh which poems you use with your classes? Are the poems you use in class previous GCSE anthology poems? Do you use poems written/performed by young people?
- Do students have the chance to experience poets as real people?
- What opportunities do students have to browse, listen to or read poetry of their own choosing in class?
- What opportunities do they have to write/record/perform in English classes or in other subjects, at lunchtime or after school?
- Do you write with them or talk about poems you have read outside school?
Some creative suggestions

• Questions generated by students around a text or an image
• Using images to prompt discussion and writing
• Use of question cards to explore a text in different ways
• Drama strategies such as conscience alley, hot seating, role on the wall
• Using personal and imagined contexts to explore identities
• Objects - arguments about links between seemingly unconnected objects (these could be subject specific or random collections)
• Becoming the voice of an object to develop new perspectives/stimulate discussion about nature of poetry
• Writing ‘found’ poems or prose texts drawing on language from other sources
Some creative suggestions (2)

• Make space for drafting poetry, students reading other students’ drafts aloud and collaboration
• Make space for discussing published writers’ drafts
• Compile KS3 personal or group anthologies
• Create poetry poster exhibitions with introductory labels written by students
• Regularly introduce poems written/performed by young people (like examples here

http://slam.poetrysociety.org.uk/uncategorized/dust-in-the-wind
Creative challenges when working with examination level students

- Time: constraints and opportunities
- Danger of stale texts/text overkill - especially if beginning in Year 9
- Linear examination structure
- Memory and recall capacity
- Students’ previous experiences of poetry - the poems themselves and how they have been asked to engage with it
- Assessment constraints - why should I ask students to write poetry if they are not assessed on it?
Some creative suggestions (3)

Building in opportunities for:
• initial responses - that moment will never return
• making choices
• performing or playing creatively with language of the examined poems

Seeing beyond the set anthology:
• seeing the single poem as part of a wider body of work written by a poet
• seeing the anthology as a deliberately constructed text
• widening the poetryscope - building in chances for students to bring in poems/recordings which might link thematically or stylistically as unseen preparation
• using the language of poems as found texts or collapsing them as wordbanks/sources for students’ own writing
• supporting students to continue writing poetry beyond the classroom

Young Poets Network
http://ypn.poetrysociety.org.uk/category/workshop/
Some creative suggestions (4)

• Using drafts to explore writers’ choices - see different drafts of *Adlestrop* by Edward Thomas in *Drafting and Assessing Poetry* (Dymoke 2003) along with examples/discussions by Ian McMillan, Jackie Kay, Moniza Alvi and other poets about their writing processes.

• Looking at alternative word choices/ways of reading i.e. *City Blues* by Mike Hayhoe: the reader explicitly chooses their route through the words and makes a poem for themselves.

• Giving English and Media Centre’s *Revision-in-Action!* booklets to Yr 11 GCSE students to use independently.
‘Poetry is not a luxury it is a vital necessity of our existence... Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so that it can be thought’
(Audre Lorde 1977: 419)
Thank you for listening

You can contact me through my website: http://suedymokepoetry.com (where you’ll find my blog & downloadable poetry teaching resources/research references)

and at: sd100@le.ac.uk (to follow up on any issues I have raised or to share your practice)