

READING AND MAKING ANTHOLOGIES

Reading Poetry

Sue Dymoke

Students' experiences of poetry, both at primary and secondary school, are often restricted to a very limited diet of poems. In *Poetry in Schools, a survey of practice 2006/07* Ofsted concludes that the range of poems used in primary classrooms in England is limited. Sometimes children only encounter humorous poems which lack sufficient challenge or acknowledgement of their own life experiences. In secondary schools there is a related concern, particularly at GCSE level, where students study the same poems and anthologies as many of their teachers once studied and answer questions on them that invite often contorted comparisons between texts (Dymoke 2003). Such students could be in danger of leaving compulsory education with the view that poetry is just one set of poems chosen by someone else.

The bleak picture above does not, however, need to be the norm. The activities below, which can be adapted to suit students of all ages and abilities, suggest how the typical school diet of poems can be enriched. They are drawn from my own work with students and my experiences as an anthologist. The strategies should help to develop students' creativity, their critical understanding of a range of texts and their own tastes in this fantastic and wide-ranging genre.

The document *Progression in Poetry* (DCSF 2006) offers imminently sensible guidance on poetry teaching within the Primary Framework. It suggests 'children should read a rich vein of poetry that includes many different forms and styles' and identifies one of the ways that they will make progress is through: 'reading, performing, becoming familiar and drawing upon a rich range of poetry'. With this in mind, you might like to try out the following anthology activities.

a) Introducing anthologies and single collections

For this activity you will need to put together a large selection of different poetry books. (Your school library or the library support service should be able to help you with this. For some suggested anthology titles refer to the end of this article.) Make sure there is plenty of browsing time. Ask the students to work in small groups to investigate and categorise their selection of the books in different ways. For this inductive approach you might want to give them some questions to start them off such as:

- How are the different books organised ?
- Are the poems grouped in sections?
- Are the poets or poems listed in alphabetical order?

Has a different kind of system been used? Why?
 Can you find out more about the poets inside?
 How does the title link with the book as a whole?
 How are illustrations used?
 Does the book have an introduction?
 If so what does it tell you about why the anthology/collection has been compiled?

The students' categories and findings on the essential differences between single authored collections and anthologies can be pooled and discussed as a class.

This could lead into a further discussion about which book they thought was the best designed, contained the best poems, was the most unusual etc.

Each group (or each student) could then be asked to share a newly discovered poem from the books they have browsed and to say why they liked it.

b) Making choices

Anthologists cannot always put every poem they like into an anthology: sometimes old favourites have to be left out because there is not enough room or they just do not fit with the other poems selected. When Andy Croft and I were editing our anthology *Not Just a Game: sporting poetry* (published by Five Leaves in 2006), we had far too many poems about some sports to start with and had to cut back ruthlessly so that the collection was more balanced and offered more to a wider range of readers. To replicate this common problem, you could give your students a small selection of poems on a linked theme to select from.

For example:

“Hurricane” by Caroline Carver
 “The Wind Began to Rock the Grass” by Emily Dickinson
 “Wind” by Ted Hughes
 “Windy Nights” by Robert Louis Stevenson
 (This selection would be most suitable for a Yr 9 class.)

Explain to the group that an editor is compiling a new anthology of lively poems about the weather (or whatever your chosen theme is). The anthology will be for primary children (or adults or whatever age you decide). There is only room for one more poem about wind and storms. Which poem should the editor select and why?

In small groups or pairs they should read aloud each poem several times and discuss its appeal, merits and difficulties. They should put together a case for their chosen poem and present this at a whole class editorial meeting where a final decision will be made.

For variations on this idea: from their browsing, students could recommend an additional poem on the same theme or they could select their own shortlist of poems and each defend one of the poems.

c) Compiling an anthology

This can provide an extremely rich opportunity for students to engage with reading and writing poetry in a more independent way. Students could use their writing portfolios as a starting point for anthology work. When compiling their own poetry anthologies they will need to be able to read each others' work and browse through a wide range of published poetry texts. The most successful anthology work is tightly focused: students work to strict publishing deadlines and submit a previously agreed number of poems and/or pages. In order to develop their critical skills and take a reader's view, they could be asked to:

- make links between the poems they choose (for example by comparing ways in which different poets handle similar subjects or forms);
- select some poems they have discovered as potential models for their own further writing (and explain why they have chosen them and how they have drafted their own poems);
- make decisions about the illustration and overall design of their anthologies which demonstrate an understanding of the poems included;
- provide an introduction to their anthology in which they explain their choices and comment on what they have learned about poetry.

d) Inviting an anthologist into your classroom

You may want to invite an anthologist to visit your classroom. He or she can talk about the processes involved in choosing poems from particular anthologies. You could ask an anthologist to work with your class to refine the students' own selections. Well known anthologists include John Agard and Grace Nichols, Roger McGough, Brian Moses, Andrew Fusek Peters, Morag Styles, Fiona Waters and Anne Harvey. I once invited Anne Harvey, editor of many highly regarded collections including *The Language of Love* (1989) and *Criminal Records* (1994), to work with Yr 9 and Yr 10 students. She shared her insights about editorial processes and offered the students advice on types and titles of poems they might want to select for their own anthologies. This event really informed the students' developing understanding of poetry and its publication.

(You should be able to contact most anthologists through their publishers. Remember that you might be expected to pay expenses and a fee for their time.)

e) Publication of students' poetry anthologies

When publishing class texts, it is essential that students are involved in all the different stages of the production process (not just designing their page and typing in the poems). This should include make group decisions about overall design and editorial content. A class publication could provide further opportunities to compare features of collections they like and to consider how single and anthology collections are arranged and titled.

f) Web Anthologies and Podcasts

Anthology making does not of course have to be print-bound. If you are working in a web environment you could encourage your students to work creatively in this medium by devising PowerPoint or iMovie versions of poems and building in hyperlinks to: dictionary definitions of obscure terms; blog discussions and critical interpretations; live performances;

still images and digital video; other poems on the same subject; related news articles; contextual and historical material and so on. Alternatively, your students could create a podcast (or tape-recorded) anthology with their own introduction and links to a short selection of poems along with their recorded performances and listeners'/readers' reactions to them.

Copyright considerations

Anthology work could result in a printed, recorded or virtual product. Whenever you are working with texts you must be wary of infringing copyright. Many poems appear on the web illegally and some are inaccurate versions of the original. Make sure you only use (and acknowledge) reliable sources and ensure your students are learning good habits when they read, perform and select from copyrighted work.

Some useful resources

Poetry Anthologies

Many of these can be read and used in different ways with students aged 7-19.

- Agard, John and Nichols, Grace (eds.) (1994) *A Caribbean Dozen*, Walker
- Benson, Gerard, Chernaik, Judith & Herbert, Cicely (eds.) (1994) *Poems from the Underground*, Cassell
- Benson, Gerard (ed.) (1995) *Does W trouble You?* Puffin
- Bloom, Valerie (ed.) (2003) *One River Many Creeks*, Macmillan
- Brown, Stewart & McWatt, Mark (2005) *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse*, Oxford
- Burnett, Paula (ed.) (1986) *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English*, Penguin
- Chatterjee, Debjani (ed.) (2000) *The Redbeck Anthology of British South Asian Poetry*, Redbeck Press
- Cope, Wendy (ed.) (2002) *Is that the New Moon?* Collins
- Croft, Andy. & Dymoke, Sue (2006) *Not Just a Game: sporting poetry*, Five Leaves
- Duffy, Carol Ann (ed.) (2003) *Overheard on a Saltmarsh*, Young Picador
- Foster, John (ed.) (1986) *Spaceways*, OUP
- Foster, John (ed.) (1999) *Word Whirls and other shape poems*, OUP
- Fuller, John (ed.) (2000) *The Oxford Book of Sonnets*, OUP
- Fraser, Bashabi & Chatterjee, Debjani (eds.) (2003) *Rainbow World: Poems from Many Cultures*, Hodder Wayland
- Gent, Robert (ed.) (1996) *Poems for the Beekeeper*, Five Leaves Publications
- Harrison, Michael (ed.) (2001) *A Book of Very Short Poems*, OUP
- Harrison, Michael & Stuart Clark, Christopher (eds.) (2001) *The Oxford Treasury of Classic Poems*, OUP
- Harvey, Anne (ed.) (1996) *Criminal Records*, Penguin
- Heaney, Seamus and Hughes, Ted (eds.) (1982) *The Rattlebag*, Faber & Faber
- Hoyles, Asher & Martin (2002) *Moving Voices - Black Performance Poetry*, Hansib Publications
- Langer, Jeniifer (2005) *The Silver Throat of the Moon: Writing in Exile*, Five Leaves

- McGough, Roger (ed.) (1982) *Strictly Private*, Penguin
- McGough, Roger (ed.) (1983) *Sky in the Pie*, Penguin
- McHough, Roger (ed.) (1998) *The Ring of Words*, Faber & Faber
- McMillan, Ian (ed.) (1989) *Against the Grain*, Nelson
- Magee, Wes (ed.) (1991) *Madtail, Minihale*, Penguin
- Markham, E.A. (ed.) (1989) *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies & Britain*, Bloodaxe
- Mitchell, Adrian (ed.) (1993) *The Orchard Book of Poems*, Orchard
- Moses, Brian (ed.) (2002) *Are We Nearly There Yet?* Macmillan
- Neill, Heather (ed.) (2001) *The TES Book of Young Poets*, Orchard
- Nicholls, Judith (ed.) (1993) *Earthways, Earthwise*, OUP
- O'Brien, Sean (ed.) (1998) *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945*, Picador
- Peters, Andrew Fusek (ed.) (1999) *Sheep Don't Go to School*, Bloodaxe
- Rice, John (ed.) (2002) *Scottish Poems*, Macmillan
- Rosen, Michael (ed.) (1994) *A Different Story*, English & Media Centre
- Sissay, Lemn (ed.) (1998) *The Fire People - Black British Poetry*, Payback Press
- Styles, Morag and Cook, Helen (eds.) (1990) *Ink-slinger*, A & C Black
- Sweeney, Matthew (ed.) (2001) *The New Faber Book of Children's Verse*, Faber & Faber
- Waters, Fiona (ed.) (2001) *Poems Then and Now: poetry collection 3*, Evans
- Wilson, Raymond (ed.) (1995) *The Nine O'Clock Bell*, Penguin

Books

Dymoke, Sue (2003) *Drafting and Assessing Poetry* Paul Chapman Publishing (ISBN 0 – 7619 4855 4) – for more information about using anthologies and other practical approaches to teaching poetry

Halford, Deborah & Zaghini, Edgardo (2006) *Universal Verse Poetry for Children* Barn Owl Books (ISBN 1 903015 618) – a useful guide to children's poetry anthologies

Websites

www.poetryarchive.org

Listen to recordings of poets and visit sections of the site specially designed for teachers and children.

www.poetrylibrary.org.uk/education/children/advice

Website of The Poetry Library on the South Bank in London - includes poetry trails advice to young writers and a children's zone with podcasts.

www.poetryclass.net

Training and resources for teachers