Poetry as a way of seeing: Risk, silence and attention

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ABSTRACT
Poetry and poetic encounters provide unusual ways of seeing and responding to the world. They also open portals to invention and significant meaning for students. Beyond learning appropriate linguistic conventions and writing techniques, students require open-ended environments – as practicing artists do – to fully ignite their imaginations. Risk taking, silence and attention are essential states for children to experience and explore in order to inspire their creativity and express their personal narratives.

Introduction

How can you make something from nothing?
A palace from a stone?
A body from a bone?
Katerina, The trunk, Year 10, Meriden

Poetry is more than linguistic devices and distillations of sense and sound. In a world of visual bombardment and information overwhelm, poetic encounters can provide responsive ways of seeing that open portals to invention and meaning for students. Beyond literary conventions and writing techniques, children require similar open-ended environments as practicing artists to fully ignite their imaginations. In order to carve true creative spaces amidst the dense obligations of classroom teaching we need to allow for unknown landscapes that invite obscurity, deep listening, meaningful silence and acute attention. It is these fertile states that underpin creative practice and bring the study and composition of poetry to life in ways that are deeply impacting and transformational. They also have wider implications in burgeoning areas of mental health, resilience and the well-being of young people.

While creativity in classrooms has historically been perceived as somewhat of a specialist area and inaccessible to those outside of the arts, there are real ways to create vibrant investigative environments in school settings. As an artist and passionate educator I am interested in making these strategies readily available so that classrooms can become sites of both mystery and meaning where students are supported to access and express their unique voices.

Over a 25 year career as a teaching artist I have become increasingly interested in developing strategies to translate rigorous creative practice for a young audience. With a pedagogy underpinned by risk taking, silence and attention I share some simple strategies and navigational tools to elicit and support these essential states in the classroom. In my role at the Red Room Company, which is a not-for-profit arts organisation that creates unusual poetry projects, exposure to a range of processes and artistic practice is key to igniting the breadth and depth of poetic potential in students. Red Room is committed to expanding experiences of poetry and poetic ways of seeing. Through our national Poetry Object competition we provide opportunities for students to explore their own histories and narratives both as bridges into creative spaces, as well as indicators of best pedagogical approaches for their needs. Also included in this article is an excerpt from our Poetry Object learning resource, which offers practical activities to support creative thinking and writing, and an invitation for students and their teachers to enter our 2016 Red Room Poetry Object competition.
Risk
I was recently teaching an experimental drawing workshop to upper primary students and asked them to draw a self-portrait with their eyes closed. I am not unaccustomed to protests but was particularly struck this day by the palpable fear in many that they would ‘get it wrong’ or were somehow being set up for failure. Developing the courage to take this kind of risk and to face a blank page without a known outcome is exactly the state required to compose new work or to locate and express a unique voice. Invention begins with not knowing and students need to develop the ability to risk making their own mark in order to access their distinct capacity for creation. There is a clear shift in the energy of a room when children realise there is no preconceived answer to a question or concept being explored.

While fear might be the initial response, with support students’ imaginations are ignited when faced with open-ended experimental opportunities. Often a deep sense of curiosity is awoken and the thrill of discovery displaces their fear. Similarly in writing and responding poetically, when students take real risks, make mistakes and have unbridled experiences we allow them to enter a truly creative process in which poetry becomes more than the sum of its linguistic parts. Activity 1 offers a way of exploring self and experimenting with risk and not knowing.

Activity 1: Eyes closed self-portraits
Materials: paper, graphite pencils, silence
Ask students to close their eyes and listen to the instructions – delivered very slowly and allowing time to explore. They might need to be reminded to close their eyes, as it is a difficult skill that develops as trust increases over time.

Explore the contours of your face with your fingertips, paying close attention to detail. Count your eyelashes and measure the space between your eyes. Feel the texture of your hair, the movement in your ear lobes and the skin of your eyelids. Press into your cheekbones then rest both palms over your eyes and watch the light dim. Imagine that your face is a poem. Imagine what that poem might be called? Whisper the poem to yourself.

Now explain that students will have a short time to draw a self-portrait with their eyes closed. I find it is good to do this more than once as it takes time to trust the process and often students are tempted to ‘cheat’ the first couple of times until the value and enjoyment of experimentation becomes clearer.

Reflection:
How did it feel to draw with your eyes closed? Did you find it freeing or restricting? Were you nervous or relieved? What was interesting about looking at your finished self-portrait? What did you learn about yourself? Why do you think an exercise like this might be valuable to do before writing a poem?

Silence
As adults we require time for reflection in order to collect our thoughts and gather them into coherence. There is an understanding that, to absorb the impact of a poem or begin to compose our own, we need to wait for the noise of the world to recede enough to hear the whispers of our own thinking. We sometimes forget that students benefit from similar opportunities for reflection and we expect them to respond, critique or create without any time to ponder. Invention comes not only from research and intention but also from deep silence and obscurity.

In supporting students to develop writing skills that take into account authentic expression we need to provide uncluttered landscapes. Here it becomes possible to think, locate ideas and write in ways that are unhindered and experimental. Imposed quiet is very different from the deep reflective
listening that can reveal epiphany or inspiration. Even very young children can sense the shift in a room when, together with their peers, they enter a state of deep listening. It is as if the floor of the room sinks and walls fall away, inviting the world to be heard differently. It is from this grounded state of awareness that the acute attention and specificity necessary for creative writing can begin to form. Activity 2 offers a way of activating deep listening in the classroom.

Activity 2: Deep listening
Materials: Pen, paper and listening

Ask students to lie down and close their eyes. Be patient as they unclutter their own minds with fidgeting and giggles. Remind them that they are searching for a different kind of quiet in their bodies and understand that silence and deep listening are skills that are complex and take time to develop.

Listen to your friends settling around you and notice the sounds that fall away as everyone’s bodies become still and quiet. Listen to the other sounds inside the room and see if you can identify any of them in your own mind. Stretch your listening to notice the sounds of cars or birds in the distance. See if you can stretch your listening all the way home. Imagine the sounds on your street and inside your house. Now bring your attention back to your body and see if you can hear your heart beating or the blood pumping through your veins. Keep listening. Now listen to the silence. Is it light or heavy? Thick or soft? If silence were a poem what would it be called?

Now invite students to stretch and stand slowly, then without speaking move to their desks to write the poem that is silence. Encourage them to write it, even if the instruction doesn’t make sense.

If silence were a poem you could hear, what would it be? Write it.

Reflection:
What did you notice when everyone first lay down and closed their eyes? How did the feeling in the room change as everyone settled? Was there a sound you were surprised to hear? What did you notice in your body when the room became very quiet? Why do you think practising listening is important for writing poetry?

Attention
We have become accustomed to distraction and multi-tasking at the expense of presence. Even young students can work across tabs on their screens and often have multiple digital conversations on various devices while in the presence of their friends. Children are digital natives with an intuitive ability to read multiple narratives simultaneously and take in vast amounts of superficial information at, perhaps, the expense of attention to detail.

Supporting students to look closely at the world around them also helps them see themselves more acutely, which is a significant factor in composing original work. The world can be noisy and our minds saturated by broad thinking and vast learning landscapes. There is value in honing our attention so we can articulate detail and distil the world through a lens of specificity essential for writing poetry. Activity 3 helps students experience presence and develop attention to detail.
Activity 3: Cultivating presence

Materials: Graphite pencils, paper, attention

Tell the students:

1. Make a small mark on a page each time you breathe in. Make a different kind of mark each time you breathe out. Keep breathing until your whole page is covered in two kinds of marks.
2. Spend a long time looking at the marks on your page. Keep looking at them until you feel uncomfortable and they start swimming in front of your eyes.
3. Draw 100 circles on your page.
4. Write words on top of the circles to describe your marks. Are they tiny or blurry, wispy or bold? Keep writing adjectives until you can’t think of any more.
5. Now describe your marks using only words that you have made up or don’t know the meaning of.
6. Think about how the marks and words on your page can be a poem.

Reflection:

What happened to your body as you made marks for each of your breaths? What did you notice when you were drawing circles? Did you lose count or care about making sure that there were exactly 100 on your page? What happens when you look at the same thing for a long time? Can a page of marks and circles and made up words be a poem? Why or why not?

Red Room Poetry Object

Red Room Poetry Object (see Figure 1) is a free national poetry writing competition that invites students in Years 3–10, and their teachers, to submit poems inspired by talismanic objects that are special to them. All the poems submitted are published online, with winning and commended poems being exhibited in galleries and public spaces engaging students with a wide audience. The poem, Book, by April is an example of one of the highly commended poems from 2015.

Book

You open its delicate pages, you look at the cover and you know
it’s the beginning of an adventure, a whole new world
You’re scared to open it, but you do
and see words strung together like silk
the world you’re in fades away
and a new one appears
I can hear tiny quiet beats
like a tiny paper heart or
life running through it
like a paper factory, always alive
It hides not wanting to be seen just like a leopard
It defends itself like a leopard
Life blossoms through it and it continues to live, just like a leopard

April, North Fitzroy Primary School
Figure 1. Poetry Object

Bringing a special personal object into the classroom can provide windows to hidden histories, family backgrounds and ways of seeing that create significant connections and starting points for students in composing poetry. Following are some suggested steps for developing *Poetry Object* poems to enter into the competition.

**Step 1: What is a talismanic object?**

*My talisman is my shield and my protection.*

Ana, Glenmore Road Public School

Talismanic objects are felt to be magic and said to bring protection or good luck. A talismanic object can also be something that has personal significance, a long history or is special to you for secret reasons.

Some people carry feathers, heirloom jewellery or other palm-sized objects that can be tucked into a pocket for safekeeping.

**Step 2: Choose an object that is important to you**

*In my cold hands I clutch my bird book.*

Helena, Albuera Street Primary

Walk silently through your room or house and notice whether anything invites you to pick it up. Choose an object that feels special or significant to you. Some examples are shown in Figure 2. Your object could be a smooth stone you found in a crevice of the playground, a lost tooth, a handmade gift or the worn wooden spoon that your grandmother uses to mix your birthday cakes.

*Hold it to your ear,*

*let it breathe out its secrets.*

*Its trace of a salty scent,*

*hovering poignantly in the air.*

Sian, Glenmore Road Public School

- Cradle it in both hands with your eyes closed. Notice how it makes you feel.
- Sit quietly and listen to the stories it whispers when you listen deeply.
- Open your eyes and discover it as if for the first time.
Step 3: Automatic writing

*The whole universe is in your tiny mouth.*
Saieesha, Methodist Ladies College

Automatic writing is like pouring your brain onto the page in front of you and sifting through scribbled debris to find meaning and relevance. Artists and writers often do this before beginning a new work to uncover ideas, memories and feelings that fear, judgement and distraction can make it impossible to hear.

Have nothing in front of you except for a pen, paper and your talismanic object. Set a timer for three minutes and begin writing in response to your object without censoring your stream of consciousness. Do the following:

- Write silently;
- Write fast;
- Keep writing even when your hand gets sore;
- When you run out of things to write, keep writing;
- You might spend a few moments writing *I don't know what to write* until your imagination kicks in again and takes you in a new direction;
- After five minutes take a moment to read through your automatic writing and circle words or sentences that are interesting, unusual, original or meaningful to you.

Step 4: Ways of seeing/drawing

*Math father's hand, a map of calluses.*
Cameron, Kamaru High School

Draw your object on the same page in as many different ways as you can. Figure 3 provides an example that might inspire you.
Step 5: Writing prompts

- Write as many obvious adjectives as you can to describe your object and collect them into a long list. Don’t use any of these words in your poem.
- Imagine you have to describe your object to a person who is blind or to someone who you are talking to over the phone.
- Describe the memories that live inside your talismanic object: How did the object find you? What special experiences have you shared with your object?
- Write a poem about your talismanic object as fast as you can. Cut out each line and then collage it together in a different way.
- Write a letter to your object in a secret code.

Step 6: Overcoming clichés and using specific imagery

Pointy ears like little corn chips, a long snout like an ice-cream cone.
Nataha, North Fitzroy Primary

A cliché is a phrase or simile that is so common that it has lost any originality or impact having been used so many times. Complete the table by filling in the cliché before composing your own original or specific image.
### Starter cliché | Your own specific imagery
---|---
Example: As black as night | Example: As black as a trail of ants carrying onyx treasure
As slow as … | As slow as …
As bright as … | As bright as …
As smooth as … | As smooth as …
As strong as … | As strong as …
As delicate as … | As delicate as …

**Step 7: Writing the poem**

Drawing on your object, write a 20 line poem in response to your talismanic object and enter it into the 2016 Red Room *Poetry Object* competition. All poems submitted to Red Room *Poetry Object* will be published on Red Room Company’s website and winning/commended poems will be part of an extensive public exhibition.

Red Room Creative Learning works with students, teachers and communities to deepen their engagement with poetry by nurturing creative practice through inspired, critical and imaginative investigation. These learning programs create immersive environments where practicing poets guide students through a range of writing processes to unlock unusual ways of seeing, interpreting and responding. The Red Room is committed to publishing these outcomes and providing a platform for young poets to share their work in the public domain. Through these programs, students develop a critical voice and sense of agency, providing opportunities for personal development and reflection.

Students and teachers can register for *Poetry Object* by contacting Lilly Blue: lilly@redroomcompany.org; 02 9319 5090/+61 2 9319 5090.

**Lilly Blue** is Head of Creative Learning at The Red Room Company. She is a visual artist and educator with a background in physical performance, installation and community arts. She has worked internationally delivering arts residencies, professional development programs, creative commissions and exhibitions, as well as designing arts programming for young audiences driven by a rigorous studio practice. Together with dancer Jo Pollitt she is the Creative Director of *BIG Kids Magazine*, an Australian contemporary arts publication that features the work of children and artists side by side and promotes the arts as an everyday way of seeing and responding to the world.