What’s poetry got to do with it?  
The importance of poetry for enhancing literacy and fostering student engagement

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ABSTRACT
Beginning with a description of a Year 10 poetry unit taught by the writer, the article argues that despite apparent decline, poetry teaching in secondary literacy programs for years 7–10 remains vital because of its potential for deep personal engagement and for its promotion of a diverse range of literacy competencies. The article offers suggestions for enhancing poetry teaching and nurturing greater focus on poetry, not only in literacy and English classrooms, but across the curriculum.

Several years ago, I recall teaching a Year 10 English class a 10-week unit of work focused on Australian poetry. This poetry was especially concerned with the nature of Australian identity and how this identity was formed in war, peace and through changes such as those seen in the waves of migration in the 19th and 20th centuries. As a class, we looked at Les Murray, Bruce Dawe, Banjo Patterson and Gwen Harwood, to name but a few of the poets with whom the students engaged. This engagement was not only with published poets but also with other Australian poetry, song lyrics and verse that might not generally be accorded the label ‘poetry’.

The class not only enjoyed their encounter with Australian poetry, but also began to write their own poetry as a response to the poetic language they were reading and discussing in class in the context of a set of big ideas gleaned from Australian history. Around the theme of who we are or could be as Australians, an extensive range of remarkable and compelling poems was produced by these students, some of which were submitted for assessment (for they had to write six original poems as part of their work), but most were completed outside of school and then brought into class to share. One poem that stands out for me is ‘Happiness’. This is one student’s grappling with the deep issue of inequity and poverty and is written in the form of an allegory.

From stretched carriages as black as darkness incarnate,  
They stride down the red rug to enter a citadel of gold.  
A sentinel, with his record as long as he himself,  
Logs their awaited arrival and proceeds with a nod.  
This continues until the hall has been filled.  
The guests vary in size,  
Each with the same motive:  
To flaunt their good fortune and sing their own praise.  
Hands hidden beneath treasures with values unknown,  
Garbs made from the finest of fine,  
Colours from the depth of a coral reef in every corner.  
To brag and to boast as the lion in light,  
Their stare always down, because who could be higher?  
They claim to have the sun and everything under,
But do they own happiness? I ponder, I wonder …
Then, from a door at the back a pauper advances,
Hands hidden beneath grime and filth,
Garbs that hang as if off a cadaver,
Colours dry, dull, dreary.
Yet a smile, a genuine smile weaves itself across his face.
Why – does he have a hidden hoard of which no one will know?
Odd; how those who stare at him in disgust are not pleased with their plight,
While the tattered minion is content with his scraps.
Scholars of old have taught to forget not this:
‘Who is wealthy? He who is glad with his lot.’

For many of the students, such as the student who wrote ‘Happiness’, this poetry output became a source of inspiration, personal reflection and expression, including poetic performance and song making. One might even suggest that the poetry had a therapeutic function, as students shared with each other their experiences of being young Australians of diverse ethnic backgrounds making sense of their place in the world (Haertl, 2014). Clearly, the writing of poetry that emerged in the unit had a strong connection to the personal experiences of this group of students and, the student who wrote ‘Happiness’, not only performed his poem but used it to explore his own concerns about the disparity between the haves and have-nots in Australian society, especially in third world countries.

Through teaching this unit, what became increasingly apparent to me as a literacy educator is the power of poetry to develop substantial literacy capacities. For this group of students, poetry was not only a significant form of personal and transformative expression but also fostered an extensive range of literacy competencies and deep engagement with language that are not readily found in other forms of reading and writing. These students were researching ideas for poems, studying the poetry of prominent Australian poets and offering literary analysis, trying out poetry ideas and lines in groups and literature circles, exploring the forms and rhythms of poetry, writing in third spaces (other than the classroom) and bringing this work back to the classroom, and reading and performing it for other students. The writing and the studying of poetry were in synergy, and seamlessly unfolding in the classroom, lesson to lesson, constructed upon the pleasure of words.

At the same time, some critical questions began to emerge for me about the place of poetry more widely in literacy practices across the nation, suggested by feedback from colleagues in other schools. First, what is the priority given to poetry in English classrooms and in literacy practices across schools and different learning contexts? Second, how is it being taught? Thirdly, do teachers care about poetry, or are teachers as passionate about poetry as me? Finally, what can teachers do to enhance their capacity to teach poetry?

There are no easy answers to such questions, more so since research into the teaching of poetry in Australian classrooms is not extensive. Research by Weaven and Clark (2013, 2014) and Myhill and Wilson (2013) suggests that there is significant reluctance to teach poetry positively and meaningfully in classrooms, and there is also considerable unevenness of quality in poetry teaching across primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. A British report published in 2007 documented the dire state of poetry teaching in the UK (OFSTED, 2007), and other research noted a tendency to package poetry teaching (Hennessy & McNamara, 2011). This reflects the earlier work by Benton (1984) who acknowledged the deep problems with poetry teaching internationally. Research in the US also supports the problematic nature of poetry teaching (Burge & Quick, 2014).

My strong belief is that poetry is vitally important as part of our literacy programs, and I propose that it must be actively maintained and given emphasis in curriculum documents and classroom practices, even across discipline areas.
Different views of literacy

The rhetoric of Australian curriculum frameworks, including the Australian Curriculum, tends to represent literacy and literacy practices in classrooms in a rather instrumental or ‘packaged’ way that does not fully embrace or legitimise more expressive and personal forms of textual output, like the poetic forms identified above. Literacy is often conceived mostly in terms of using language to function in the world and to communicate orally and in written form for a range of situations, purposes and audiences, employing a variety of analogue, digital and media forms that are designed to meet the expectations around assessment, further education and employability (Davis, 2017). The Creating texts element of the Australian Curriculum describes how students:

become increasingly proficient at creating texts for an increasing range of purposes. Students’ writing moves from representing basic concepts and simple ideas to conveying abstract concepts and complex ideas, in line with the demands of the learning areas. (Australian Curriculum, 2018)

School literacy programs are built around this functional notion of literacy, which originates from linguists such as Halliday (1973).

There is nothing wrong with that conceptualisation of literacy; after all, our students need to produce functional texts and gain a range of literacy competencies, and they need to be able to participate and have agency in the world. Moreover, students’ ability to become engaged citizens who can affect change in society is dependent on robust literacy competencies and the currency and power that they afford (Celeste, 2016).

But, that is not the end of the story. It is not all that literacy is about or should be about. Thank goodness there is more.

Literacy should also include language affordances that enable students to be creative and expressive as well as functional, and able to meet assessment outcomes in textual production (Dymoke, 2001; Evans, 2012). And in this creation, in this dabbling with words and creative risk-taking, there is joy, reflection and a discovery about themselves as human beings in a troubled and complex world. Not only should students be able to write arguments, engage in procedural writing and construct reports, for instance, but teachers should also foster in middle years learners the ‘power of the imagination and literary expression to provide pleasure and enrich life’ (AATE, 2018). Poetry writing also allows room for more unregulated textual forms that can engender strong political views (Ossip, 2017). Thus, writing poetry becomes part of a unified meaning making system, which, in the case of the Year 10 poetry unit explored in this article, involved the personal experiences of students juxtaposed to Australian history, Australian poets and students’ evolving sense of self.

Literacies and poetry

What, then, is so important or distinct about poetry as a form of writing? Why should teaching poetry matter at all? For a start, poetry is language use in its most creative, distilled and elemental form. Poetry is steeped in emotion and thought. It is built on tight description and careful artistic creation. It carries a rich vein of meanings associated with individual words and the nuances of those words. Poetry thus encourages a precision and economy with the use of words, not just in poetry writing but in other forms as well. I observed such literacy skills in the textual practices of my Year 10 students.

Through poetry all dimensions of human experience and engagement with self and the world can be accessed and shared. As such, it might well be useful for emotional intelligence, as well as literacy (Morris, Urbanski & Fuller, 2005). To put it another way, in reading and writing poetry, in using and exploring the language forms of poetry, we code and decode these shared human meanings and explore what is quintessential in our experiences of life. That, in my opinion, is a thrilling enterprise and a literacy-enhancing process par excellence. Indeed, in poetry we are able to transcend the ordinariness of the world and savour that transcendence in words that distil our human experience and contain the diversity of what makes up the human condition.
What I am suggesting, then, is that to read, write, speak and perform poetry is to be literate in the deepest and most profound sense of the word; beyond mere function to the realms of originality, self-expression, contestation and the evocation of shared meanings about the profundity of human existence. This is the place of higher order thinking and critical and aesthetic engagement; this is the space for trying out language and discovering its potential for communicating the complexities of human life and experience (Connor-Greene, Murdoch, Art Young & Paul, 2005; Tsur, 2010). In my teaching of Year 10 students in that unit of Australian poetry, in the poem ‘Happiness’ shared earlier in this article, there was indeed this complexity afforded by poetic language and the processes of engaging with that language.

Now, however, I want to come back to the functional nature of literacy that I referred to earlier; back to literacy as the ability to negotiate and live effectively in the world through the communicative power of language. How might poetry contribute to this being-in-the-world as a literate and functional person?

For a start, in writing and reading poetry there is quite a unique focus on the gradations and intricacies of language and on the impact of individual words (their connotations and inflections), unlike, arguably, any other genre of writing. In selecting words to fit in the structure of a poem, or in seeing how words and sets of words operate phonologically in a poem, there is, in my opinion, greater cognitive, semantic and emotional processing. As such, poetry fosters deep encounter with the creative possibilities in language such that the skills in using language are enhanced and extended and shifted to the innovative. In essence, I argue that you are potentially more functional in literacy terms if you engage with poetry. This is a monumental claim, but one borne out for me from many years of practice as a teacher of poetry.

Moreover, the power of language, and its ability to shape opinion and feelings, is seen in all its capacity in poetry. By writing, reading and speaking poetry I believe that this understanding of the power of language, and how even one word can affect meaning in a context, is best learnt (Longenecker, 2014).

You might well say at this point that poetry is really an elite or little read form and that writing poetry is just the territory of that strange bunch of people we call poets. However, let me point out that poetry is everywhere – in songs, raps, commercials, novels, blogs and children’s books, to name but a few. It is the most ancient and enduring form of literature. Perhaps it is the language that is closest to our consciousness as a species.

Some suggestions for promoting poetry in teaching and literacy programs

From my experience of teaching poetry, not only in Year 10 but in middle school programs, there are several suggestions that I believe are crucial for effective poetry teaching and learning, not just in English and literacy classrooms, but across discipline areas.

First, there is a need to embrace poetry in all its expressions and forms, so that it is not positioned as elitist, obscure or irrelevant and thus disengaging for students. This might include, for instance, song lyrics, raps, poetry from other cultures, verse in popular culture and performance poetry, including slam poetry.

Engagement is the key and if students can relate to the poetry in whatever forms and see it as relevant to the generation of meaning in their lives, then poetry reading, writing and performing can become a highly effective literacy strategy. It can also be an instigator for students seeing poetry as a genuine vehicle for finding their own voice as poets and exploring meaningful personal writing (Apol, 2017). What is also evident from my experiences of teaching poetry analysis and writing is that, as students’ experiences with non-traditional poetry were affirmed, and as they wrote and shared their poetry work, so the introduction of mainstream published poetry became more seamless, even pleasurable, for students.
Second, the literacy teacher (in fact, any teacher) can become a writing practitioner, modelling poetic textual practices for students, including the artistic sharing of work (Grainger, 2005). During the Year 10 unit of work on poetry, I became an active writer alongside the students and regularly shared my poetry work. For example, as a class we discussed the importance of World War I and Gallipoli for the developing identity of Australia as a nation and a people at the time. I wrote a poem about Gallipoli and about the innocent young men who came and died. Three verses (of what was a long poem) are given below:

Their eyes look up
with adventurous expectation
and wonderment about what is to come,
and their memories return to an old land
far away,
to friends and family
whose fears deepen with each absent day.

Then the guns rise from a force
whose origins are ancient
and from a people who have known travail
long before the new country
was a European possession.

The guns rise with the sun
and at sun down
Innocence has fallen,
and the great Gods of War
have thundered the awful tune of death.

The writing and sharing of this poem not only sponsored discussion about identity and war and critique of my work but was also a catalyst for several war poems by students. There was strong emotional reaction to the poem, for it was about young people who were the same age as the students. In this instance, learning became about embodiment through writing practice, constructed around doing as well as thinking, so as writer I modelled embodied practices associated with literacy, and my body became a signified centre of poetic performance that inspired the students and promoted their action (DeLozier, 1979; Eastman, 2006). In other words, through hands-on practical work by the teacher, the theory is given flesh, and the teacher is positioned as agent of action as well as co-learner and co-writer. I am aware that writing poetry with the students is a daunting practice for teachers. However, I am promoting it as a powerful catalyst for student engagement.

Finally, poetry can be promoted in schools as a legitimate way of presenting material for student assignments or as part of oral presentations or performance work in a range of discipline areas. This is especially possible in integrated teaching and learning programs that are often part of the middle school. It can also be generated in, and promoted through, digital and online platforms that give students considerable control over the poetry work produced (Hughes, 2017). Moreover, teachers can use poetry as a way of creatively exploring concepts in any discipline area, other than the usual forms of writing typical of that discipline. For example, a history teacher working with students on the impact of World War I might employ poetry not just as a primary source of evidence from the time but also use contemporary poetry as a modality to explore the impact of the war on individuals and society.
Conclusion

Let me state emphatically that good poetry teaching needs a praxis (a powerful combination of practice with theory) suited to the nature of this diverse literary genre. This praxis includes promoting students as writers as well as readers of poetry, alongside the teacher as writing practitioner and pedagogue. The synergy of linking writing with reading and analysis of poetry is powerful in developing student interest and engagement with poetry, and thus the rich potential to develop significant literacy capabilities. I thus contend that, in writing poetry, the nuances and sensibilities of published poetry are best understood.

In this praxis, poetry writing, poetry performance and poetry appreciation are equally important in learning to understand poetry and to see its potential as a form of personal and creative expression that has emancipative and transformative possibilities. While there might well be strong emphasis on more functional or instrumental notions of literacy in literacy programs in many Australian classrooms, poetry is vital for understanding the deeper meanings in the use of language and the power of language to convey tone and emotion, as well as the rhythmic patterns possible between words and within word groups. It is also important for facilitating more unfettered personal writing that is important for self-expression and for the encouragement of student voice.

Undisputedly, literacy is crucial for the wellbeing of society as a whole and for the capacity of every person to function effectively in that society. It enables the democratic process, fosters cohesion and is essential for prosperity. That being the case, and accepting the potent potential of poetry for enhancing literacy in the ways I have described, I want to be bold in my affirmation of poetry as a powerhouse in literacy practice. I believe poetry needs greater centrality in literacy programs and in content decisions in the curriculum, especially in the middle school where attitudes to poetry are often formed.

In a speech, as part of his English work in the year following the Year 10 poetry unit, a student offered the following reflection:

I remember when our Year 10 English teacher walked in and announced that we would commence the study of Australian poetry. A groan immediately rang around the room – our feelings were mutual. The teacher mentioned names of famous Australian poets and couldn’t believe our ill-informed responses. Names like Les Murray, Bruce Dawe, Banjo Patterson and Gwen Harwood were foreign to us. By the end of that semester we all had a vast knowledge about Australian poetry and a newfound thirst for poetry in general. When taught properly, poetry can be understood and thoroughly enjoyed in a most satisfying way.

The important point about this student’s reflection is, not the specifics about the poetry that he encountered, or even the understandings about poetry as a literary form (though these are certainly important). What matters is his ‘newfound thirst’ to be a literate person with voice and his capacity for self-articulation. What poetry has to do with it is sponsoring middle years writers to be profoundly aware of language and of their capacity to use that language in myriad creative ways.

References


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