

## **Engaging the Poet: Exploring poetry through creativity and criticality in English secondary education**

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Poetry, once seen as the only form of creativity, is a valuable part of the English lesson, yet the way in which it is taught is often criticised due to the pedestrian way of unpicking the poem, rather than looking at it as a vehicle for expressing creative and critical thought. Poetry is open to interpretation and reinterpretation, and therefore lends itself well to being read in a variety of contexts. Furthermore, by looking at a poem from various angles new meanings can be discovered, offering more depth and purpose to poetry reading and analysing. By looking at how creativity and criticality can be defined and how these concepts relate to poetry, the aim is to explore how poetry can be used as a tool for inviting dialogue in the classroom. Moreover, it explores how a dialogic way of learning poetry invites looking beyond what is already known.

Key words: creativity; criticality; poetry; dialogue; interpreting

### **Introduction**

Society continues to change, often due to technological growth or political shifts. For children to constantly adapt there is a need for an education that includes creativity and criticality, so that children are able to bounce ‘forward’, into the future, and to be open minded and critical of what is to come. Creativity, in this sense, is everything we do (Kress, 2012). A constant flow of thoughts needs direction. By controlling the creative thoughts for purpose and structuring them, it leads to criticality: the ability to give meaning to our creative thoughts (Freire, 2005). Introducing these concepts within poetry lessons in secondary schools aims to allow for learners to become active participants, as they review their own, their peers’ and historically accepted ideas of what a poem might mean. This opposes the current notion of passive learning in poetry lessons, in which the learner is the rhetor (receiver), rather than the sender of information (Kress, 2012). In an active and participatory learning environment, the learner links poetry to the present and is invited to find how a poem is relevant to them and the world around them. Thus, learners become critical in their thoughts, and allow themselves to interpret and re-interpret their place in and with the world. Poetry can be read in a

variety of contexts, and in doing so, it allows for constant re-interpretation, which benefits creative and critical learning.

### **From creativity to criticality**

Creativity and criticality can be defined in many ways, and thus, it is important to establish what they mean in the context of education, with particular focus on poetry learning. Creativity can be defined as everything we do, if it involves making meaning in one way or another. Gunther Kress (2012, p. 6) defines it as follows:

‘Every drawing, any representational form, every sign made, is new, an innovation; its making is ‘creative’.

Newton (2012) has a similar notion of creativity: a concept that includes something new, whether it is something new to the self or to the world. Newton (2012) gives the example that creativity can be a concept as big as the creation of a new word, but it also includes creativity on a smaller scale, such as different or ‘new’ uses of existing words (p. 8). It can then be argued that creativity is more than something novel to the world; it is the making of something novel to the self and those around us. To gain meaning from creativity an extra component is necessary. Most thoughts have little significance to daily life; it is the thoughts that have purpose that seem to stick around and become structured. When thoughts gain structure they start to be understood. Structuring thoughts often benefits from dialogue, as this supports the meaning making process (Kress, 2012; Freire, 2005(1974)). This structuring of our thoughts can be defined as the beginning of criticality.

Criticality engages the learner in a deeper understanding of the creative thoughts that appear on the surface. It leads us to controlling the quality of the ongoing flow of creative thoughts (Newton, 2012; Newton, 2013). Poetry lends itself well to this thought flow. However, in secondary schools, poetry is often analysed in set ways, as there is little time for exploring poetry for personal growth (Dymoke, 2010). Learning through dialogue provides space for seeing a poem with and within the bigger picture, whether it is relevant to historical events, to the present or to the future. Poetry ultimately plays with emotions through words. Language techniques, such as imagery, similes and

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metaphors, often come in to play as they add to the visualisation of ideas and allow for poetry to be read in different contexts. Based on individual experiences, each person will have a slightly different understanding of poems, depending on the context we read it in and life experiences. These ideas can be shared through verbal or written dialogue to appreciate the various ways poetry can be analysed. Dialogue invites the learner to question multiple meanings, which is arguably one of the most valuable components of criticality as it allows for this deeper understanding.

### **Communicating poetry**

When learners begin to read a poem, it might be more liberating for the learner to make their own meaning of a poem before being guided by existing analyses. These analyses will help the learners build on what they feel and help strengthen their arguments and deepen the learners' understanding of poetry. However, often learners want there to be a correct outcome to see whether their thoughts are right or wrong. Lambirth (2014) argues that poetry cannot be read to seek one correct outcome, as poetry is there for pleasure and is open to an infinite number of interpretations (p. 45). This leads to the poem being 'the only medium that can communicate' the entire meaning that is sought (Lambirth, 2014, p. 44). Furthermore, the poem can be interpreted as all the ideas that a poem represents to an individual or a group. If the poem is the primary communicated medium, this offers a way to promote the pleasure of reading, rather than reading to 'unpick' the poem (Steele, 2014; McGuinn, 2014). There is no longer a correct and incorrect answer, it is about how the poems and individual meanings are communicated.

There are lifelong benefits associated with creativity and criticality as it allows people to adapt in a constantly changing world. Creativity and criticality are therefore two of the most valuable assets to education, yet less room is given to their development in learners (Giroux, 2011; Kress, 2013). In a society where a lot depends on numbers and measurements, it is becoming increasingly difficult for schools, teachers and learners to include creativity and criticality as a constant flow in their lessons (Stevens, 2010). Nevertheless, poetry supports the understanding of the value of language as an art and as a form of communication. Poetry enables learners to see language in a

creative and open-ended way. In this sense, Poetry allows for a way into seeking a balance between measurable outcomes, creativity and criticality.

## **Reading poetry in context**

Many teachers will include dialogue as it is easier for students to learn with ideas bouncing off each other and to create a deeper understanding of what a poem may mean. Nevertheless, students are still very much steered towards what they need to know for the exam, rather than for their own personal growth (Steele, 2014). The issue with looking at poetry from a perspective where the meanings are set, is that poetry is not necessarily made relevant to the learner. If there is little to no relevance, there is no direct purpose in learning a poem because there is existing knowledge on the meanings of that poem. The learners do not feel like they are adding anything, and therefore are likely to disengage. A change in teaching and learning poetry to gain relevance would be a way to stimulate poetry in English secondary schools. There are a number of ways to look at poetry, so it can still be seen in contexts, rather than just from the personal perspective of the learner, some of which could be:

- Historical context
- Political context
- Religious context
- Social context
- Cultural context
- Gender context
- Emotional context

Most poetry can be read in all these contexts, and thus, the meaning of the poem will be different each time. It is up to the teacher to guide the learner in different directions of ways of seeing the poem. Stevens (2010), makes mention of a number of these contexts, and argues that looking at literary texts in different contexts ‘celebrates diversity’ (39). Stevens (2010) continues to argue that, although reading a text in a variety of ways can be demanding, the text becomes more exciting to the

reader when it becomes apparent that there is more than one way of reading it. This implies that within the limits of what the learner knows, there are 'multiple ways of seeing' (Hatch & Yannow, 2008).

### **A case study design**

To look further into how poetry is taught in classrooms, and to see how learners respond to a variety of poetry activities, an exploratory case study will be conducted at a variety of schools, with a particular focus on the GCSE years (9-11), as there is a greater focus on the exam. Although the assumption is that there is little to no time for exploring poetry in different contexts, it might well be that individual cases are engaging in such activities. By looking at the learners' experiences with poetry from different angles, it is the aim to explore how learners engage with poetry through dialogue. By inviting learners to fill in surveys on their opinion of poetry lessons and their understanding of creativity and criticality, it is the aim to see how these learners experience poetry lessons. Additionally, observations will be done to see how groups of learners engage with poetry. To understand in more depth how the students perceive and understand the value of poetry teaching and learning, focus group interviews will be held. This will be done over a two-year period, to grasp an understanding of how the learners' perceptions might change as they get closer to their exams. It will be fascinating to see whether these students' opinions and the observations are in line with existing research on whether and how creativity and criticality happen in the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

When students are enabled to see beyond the set analyses of poems and beyond their own experience, they are becoming more creative and critical in their thinking. Dialogue can be used as a tool to achieve this, as dialogue allows for creativity through language and for using language as a vehicle for understanding. Creativity and criticality are vital concepts in all aspects of education, as they allow the learner to become engaged and open minded. Poetry reading and writing helps stimulate the

ability to discuss various interpretations through language play. Furthermore, through language play learners can learn from each other and will understand more deeply those with, and around, them. Poetry, as an art, lends itself well to looking at various interpretations and to re-interpreting texts based on different contexts. Sharing these interpretations through dialogue (either verbal or written) aims to lead to innovative critical analyses of poetry. Consequently, by guiding the learners in reading poems in a variety of contexts, poetry becomes relevant to learners as they begin to see themselves not only in, but with, the world around them (Freire, 2005). It will be intriguing to explore how poetry learning is perceived in the secondary school classroom.

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