



Teaching poetry: lessons from poems

PDPs

The session commenced with a discussion on PDPs as a result of the level of anxiety amongst the group about how these should be structured. It became apparent that many trainees had been given conflicting information regarding PDPs by their schools and it was suggested that this was inevitable and not a reason for panic. The following points were raised and discussed:

- It has been suggested that cross referencing should be avoided and that this is best achieved by duplicating evidence you wish to be entered more than once.
- It was confirmed that our training managers will have the pleasure of looking through our PDPs at times convenient to them.
- It was also mentioned that any number of the groups' PDPs could be sampled by an inspector as a result of the university's ofsted inspection.
- Lesson plans can be included and so can details of material trainees may have read.

Starter

Our starter today could be described as *a whirlwind creative writing experience*, its purpose being to approach the Text level objectives for writing in Year 7. This particular starter gives pupils the opportunity to “imagine, explore and entertain” and attempt to “structure a story with an arresting opening, a developing plot, a complication, a crisis and a satisfying resolution” (quotes taken from the Framework for teaching English: Years 7, 8 and 9).

Before embarking on the activity, Phil explained to the group the five point strategy for structuring a story, based on the objective quoted above.

1. Arresting opening
2. Development
3. Complication
4. Crisis
5. Resolution

We were given the “arresting opening” and “development” of three plots and were given a few minutes to add a complication, a crisis and resolution to the plot when prompted by Phil. Here are the three openings and developments we then completed:

1. (Opening) “Jack’s best friend is Peter.” (Development) “Jack finds out that he hasn’t been invited to Peter’s party.”
2. (Opening) “Alex works in her father’s shop.” (Development) “She sees the class bully stealing in the shop.”

3. (Opening) "Sam is in a seedy coach station." (Development) "A young girl runs up and warns him that someone is coming for him and then disappears."

A few members of the group shared their short stories and then the potentials for developing the activity further were discussed. It was thought that the activity could lead on to pair work in which pupils could select a plot they believed could be developed further and that maybe this could be done. It was suggested that should this be attempted there would need to be a consideration of how to develop atmosphere and include dialogue. Phil recommended providing lower ability pupils with the first two lines of the stories on paper before the starter commences.

The starter lasted approximately 12 minutes and I personally found it hard to achieve creative success in this amount of time. My plots were generally predictable and uninteresting, involving broken vases (Jack's party) and policemen (the stealing school bully). I do not feel however that developing an original and imaginative plot was the primary purpose of this activity and that more important was to experiment with the five point structure which can be adapted for more lengthy creative writing tasks.

Teaching poetry

As requested, each member of the group came prepared with a poem and ideas for a poetry lesson. Everybody was able to offer their suggestions for how to approach a poem in the classroom and there was even the odd anecdote, as many of the group have already had a chance to teach poetry. Phil informed the group at the outset that note taking was unnecessary as all members of the group would be required to email him a copy of the poem and ideas on how to teach a lesson or series of lessons on the chosen poem. For this reason I do not intend to detail in full the ways specific poems may be approached but will attempt a broader account of the ideas and techniques trainees recommended and are currently experimenting with.

Speaking and Listening (Drama in poetry)

Amy suggested that her selected poem was well suited to drama and recommended that pupils could be asked to put actions to poems as a way of exploring the content and language of a poem. It may also help them to memorise poetry.

I have since conducted a poetry performance lesson with my Year 7s on the poem "10 Little schoolchildren" (poet unknown). This poem imitates "10 Green bottles", with the number of children decreasing with each new verse, as one by one they get into trouble or miss the school bus etc. The pupils really enjoyed the poem and worked in pairs to prepare and perform it. It worked well for a Friday lesson when their minds were on the weekend, so thanks Amy. This particular class are used to their English lessons ending with a couple of poems read to them by their

teacher, so they enjoyed the chance to have a go at reading/performing poetry themselves.

Some poems can be used to instigate a class debate. A debate is a way to develop the critical process.

Sentence level

It was suggested that a poem could be handed out to the class with the punctuation removed and that the task of punctuating it could be set. This technique not only encourages pupils to think about sentence construction but also draws attention to how poetry can be read and how punctuation can represent natural pauses and affect the rhythms in poetry.

Text level – reading

It could help to develop pupils' research and study skills by looking at statements which relate directly to the content of the poem, or maybe statements made by literary critics about the poem. Pupils could be asked to give a response to these statements.

Certain poems such as Carol Ann Duffy's "War Photographer" could be related to prose such as travel writing or journalism and comparisons and contrasts made. Poems like this also lend themselves to the use of visual aids in the classroom. This poem discusses the horrors of war and expresses the moral discomfort of a war photographer as he records the agonies of war in such an emotionally detached manner. Genuine war photography could be displayed and pupil's reactions and opinions requested.

The title could be removed from a poem and handed to a class, after reading the poem pupils should come up with suggested titles.

Annotating a poem in detail is a way of helping pupils to read for meaning, explore and understand the author's craft and examine how a poem works. Annotating a poem can be done on an OHT by the teacher as the pupils annotate their paper copies.

It may be useful to compare one poem to another. The comparison of poetry is a key part of the GCSE English literature exam.

Activities which encourage close reading

Cloze - Pupils could be asked to fill the gaps in a poem where selected words have been removed. This demands that pupils read the poem carefully in order to construct meaning. It requires choosing words that fit grammatically and that fit with the style of the rest of the poem.

Differentiation can be achieved through detailing the first and last letters of the removed word, or by listing the words on the page so that the pupil is required to select the correct one for the relevant gap.

Sequencing – Pupils could be asked to reconstruct a poem which has been cut up into chunks. The illustration we received from Karen was regarding sonnets. With the definite rhyme schemes of the varying types of sonnets, sequencing is a method of ensuring that pupils are comfortable with these rhyme patterns and able to recognise them.

Sequencing also encourages pupils to search for chronology and consider link words.

Text level - writing

Poetry writing lessons could be constructed around rewriting a selected poem by changing the tone, perhaps from sad to happy.

The last two or three verses of a poem could be withheld when a poem is handed out or read to a class and pupils could be asked to write their own endings in the style of the rest of the poem.

A class could be asked to write a monologue for one of the characters in a poem. This would require pupils to read the text closely and to represent the views of another.

Citizenship

The poem “Search for my tongue” and other poems from the Anthology are ideal for Citizenship lessons. They lend themselves to discussions about culture (art, literature, clothes, music, food and religion). The pupils could spend an ICT lesson searching the internet for information to include in a research project about the nation of the poet’s origin, or the nation detailed in the poem.

Summary

There are many ways of approaching poetry in the classroom. As a result of this session we have been able to examine many of these approaches and share and develop our ideas about how to encourage pupils to enjoy reading, writing and performing poetry. As I have mentioned, I have already made good use of some of the suggestions made, as I am sure others have. This session has been a valuable exercise in how as trainees we can learn from each other and share our experiences and ideas to assist one another’s development as teachers.