

SESSION REPORT

28 November 2002

Description, appreciation and interpretation: poetry and paintings

Exhibition at Stroud House Gallery, Stroud ***'in a dim light'***

Focus

The session was designed to show how teachers should enable pupils to follow a clear progression from regurgitation to description to appreciation, ultimately leading to interpretation. These skills, when applied to paintings/images, are also the skills used in the critical analysis of poetry. As Cowley asserts, 'At its heart, a poem is a piece of condensed language, one which creates a strong image or a series of pictures', (Cowley, 2002, page 115).

The successful progression of pupils to the final stage would enable pupils to gain A* marks for their work.

Structure

The session took the form of an informal lecture with the opportunity for trainees to try out the suggested activities for themselves. Afterwards there was an opportunity for trainees to examine the art works and paintings on display to further their own understanding of the techniques suggested.

Pupils' access to poetry

It is difficult to ask pupils to interpret a poem or piece of writing without giving them some access to it other than the task of reading. Our aim as teachers is to enable pupils to get to the stage of asking 'why' questions. The critical skills developed through the examination of a picture or painting may provide a more immediate and softer approach in readiness for the reading of the poem.

Resources

Trainees were then introduced to three books by the authors Michael and Peter Benton:

- *Picture Poems*
- *Painting with words*
- *Double Vision*

These books all have pictures that relate to the poems. The pictures provide access to the poems in the following ways through:

- Annotation and reading of the paintings
- Making links between the paintings and poems

All three books would be an invaluable teaching resource for any teacher.

The following is an example of how Van Gogh's *Starry Night, St Remy*, might be annotated:

- Let eye take in details of landscape and sky
- Place a sheet of paper alongside, or sketch a rough outline, and add comments
- Examine responses by comparison to the poem by Anne Sexton, *The Starry Night*.

There are invaluable resources available on the internet, and it would be useful to collect pictures and reproduce on an overhead transparency (in colour), for classroom use.

Trainees then had the opportunity to try this activity for themselves. A picture postcard was distributed to individuals who then discussed and annotated their responses with a partner.

'Without contraries there is no progression', Blake.

Trainees were then invited to respond to the paintings in the gallery by looking at the contrasts in the picture. For example: light and dark, old and young, fresh and old. These responses allow the deeper, interpretative response that teachers are trying to elicit from pupils. This technique can then be used to anchor meaning in a poem, even if there is no finite conclusion regarding the ultimate meaning of the poem.

Critical appreciation

Trainees were then asked to consider Bloom's taxonomy. Benjamin Bloom was an educational psychologist, and in 1956 he headed up a team of psychologists who 'developed a classification of levels of intellectual behaviour important in learning', (www.dlrn.org). The results of this study became a taxonomy that may be broken down into three essential skills: describe, explain and analyse. The following chart shows the verb examples that represent the intellectual, cognitive processes, and how they relate to the three categories of describe, appreciate and interpret.

A. Knowledge	
Describe Identify Who, when, where questions	Describe
B. Comprehension	
Translate Predict Why questions	Describe
C. Application	
Demonstrate Solve Show how	Appreciate
D. Analysis	
Explain Infer Analyse	Appreciate

E. Synthesis	
Design Create Compose	Interpret
F. Evaluation	Interpret
Assess Compare Contrast	

These skills are deployed when, for example, we discuss a film that we have seen, recalling sections that were memorable, and discussing it in a way of 'I liked it when....'.

If teachers ask pupils to describe first, then interpretation and appreciation can follow on from the merely descriptive response by skillful questioning from the teacher.

In terms of assessment, the following award levels would apply:

Descriptive	Level 5
Appreciative	Level 6
Interpretative	Level 7

In the way that the viewer can be inside or outside of the picture, so too can the reader of a poem. A reader of a poem can comment on the structure or language as an outsider describing, or as an insider appreciating and interpreting what might be happening.

To raise pupils to the level of insider it is useful to ask them to say what they like about the poem. To ask the question, 'why has the painter/author painted/written this?', is to ask for an interpretative response. Pupils should be encouraged to say something that moves them through the three levels of description, explanation to interpretation. This approach is useful particularly with abstract work as it provides a focus for beginning a dialogue.

Paul Durcan

Paul Durcan has written two books of poetry that relate to famous paintings:

- *Give me your hand*
- *Crazy about Women*

Trainees were asked to consider a picture entitled '*Running away with the hairdresser*'. The important points to note here might be questions such as, who is running away from whom, why there are contrasts of light and dark, and who is the hairdresser?

Although the poem was written after the death of the artist, as Roland Barthes suggests in his essay *Death of the author*, there is no absolute truth about the meaning of any text. Once the author releases this text into the world it is open to a multitude of meanings constructed by the readers (Cudden, 1977, page 736).

Objective and subjective responses

GCSE examiners have praised the analysis of paintings in order to stimulate critical response. This approach seems to capture atmosphere and mood, and therefore opens up the imagination.

The objective response is description and the subjective response is analysis. If pupils are asked which words describe, they will say adjectives. However, the teacher could challenge that response with an example from a text containing no adjectives. Pupils could then respond to their own pictures without the use of adjectives, thereby moving them through the stage of description (objective), to explanation and on to interpretation (subjective).

Trainees challenge

Trainees were then challenged to view the works in the gallery and to respond in the ways outlined above, namely to:

Describe
Appreciate
Interpret

Contrast

Respond objectively and subjectively avoiding adjectives

Bibliography

Cowley, S.	<i>Getting the Buggers to Write</i> (2002)	London: Continuum
Cudden, J.A.	<i>Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory</i> (1977) (Third Edition 1992)	London: Penguin Books
Distance Learning Resource Network	<i>Bloom's Taxonomy</i> (Accessed 29-11-2002)	Available from: www.dlrn.org