Poetry for Personal Development

Dr. Ramesh Pettela

Associate Professor of English, Pace Institute of Technology and Sciences, (Autonomous), Ongole, Prakasam (Dt), Andhra Pradesh-523272, India

Abstract: This paper aims to focus on the importance of poetry in personal development, understanding the self and its capacity for self-expression, usually through the creation of new poetry. What is the value of poetry for learning and development and what are its uses in education today? What role can the poem play not only in formal education, but also in personal development and well-being beyond the classroom? How might we develop our teaching practices to access such benefits? These are all important questions to address if poetry is to continue to form a central part of the teaching of English literature in our schools and universities. However, the value of poetry in learning and development is often taken for granted: assumptions about the necessity of formative encounters with ‘great’ literature overlap with anecdotal evidence about the transformative power of stories. Consider the following statements about the value of poetry and its use. Poetry matters because it is a central example of the use human beings make of words to explore and understand. Like other forms of writing we value, it lends shape and meaning to our experiences and helps us to move confidently in the world we know and then to step beyond it. Poetry’s task is to reconcile us to the world – not to accept it at face value or to assent to things that are wrong, but to reconcile one in a larger sense, to return us in love, the province of the imagination, to the scope of our mortal lives. In both cases, there is an appeal to the significant role poetry can play in our lives, yet in neither case is there indication of how poetry is able to offer such benefits. If we are to make the case for poetry’s role in education, we must address the issue of how we can measure such benefits and why they are particular to poetry rather than other art forms.

1. Introduction

Poetry matters because it is a central example of the use human beings make of words to explore and understand. Like other forms of writing we value, it lends shape and meaning to our experiences and helps us to move confidently in the world we know and then to step beyond it. Poetry’s task is to reconcile us to the world – not to accept it at face value or to assent to things that are wrong, but to reconcile one in a larger sense, to return us in love, the province of the imagination, to the scope of our mortal lives. In both cases, there is an appeal to the significant role poetry can play in our lives, yet in neither case is there indication of how poetry is able to offer such benefits. If we are to make the case for poetry’s role in education, we must address the issue of how we can measure such benefits and why they are particular to poetry rather than other art forms.

Before going any further it should be noted that poetry should be used as a tool only by those teachers who truly like poetry. As the English proverb says, “You can lead a horse to the water but you cannot make him drink”. If a teacher does not like poetry, he/she will not be able to engage students and catch their attention. While many teachers agree that teaching English through poetry is an effective method there are many that would disagree, as poetry is often considered as one of the most difficult forms. This is a great advantage as students in secondary school do not have many possibilities to use English. In addition, poems are authentic texts; their appealing structure, rhythm and sound suggest a quick and enjoyable way of learning new vocabulary, revising grammar, improving pronunciation and promoting creativity. Hence, it would be a pity if teachers do no benefit of its numerous advantages.

Part of the problem is that arguments relating to the importance of teaching poetry are often drawn together with arguments that relate to the importance of teaching literature more generally, without making the case for what is distinctive about poetry. There are some notable exceptions to this see, for instance, “In Living Memory: The Dying Art of Learning Poetry and a Case for Revival.” View all notes ‘Take, for instance, Fecho, Amatucci, and Skinner, who argue that the central aim of teaching poetry is to expand understanding of self and society: ‘teachers in English classrooms [should] situate the reading and creation of texts as ways of making meaning, as processes through which we develop existential sense of ourselves as actors in larger social worlds’. Although they highlight something of immense value in the study of poetry, they use this as the basis for a generalization about the value of literature without articulating what it is about poetry in particular that can serve such function in learning and development.

Failing to make the case for poetry in the curriculum as a distinct art form risks a reduction in the degree and range of poetry students’ encounter through education. It is widely reported that a large number of primary and secondary teachers are not comfortable teaching poetry and prefer to teach other forms of literature without a clear argument for the inclusion of poetry, there is a real concern that poetry could lose its place in the study of literature in schools. “Opportunities or Constraints?” Where is the Space for Culturally Responsive Poetry Teaching within High-Stakes Testing Regimes at This point is suggested by one of the key findings of the 2007 Ofsted report, Poetry in Schools: ‘Many teachers, especially in the primary schools visited, did not know enough about poetry and this was reflected in the limited range of poems studied’ (Ofsted 2007 Ofsted.2007. Poetry in Schools: A Survey of Practice. London: Ofsted. Where there has been a focus on the distinctiveness of poetry, this is often used as an argument for using poetry as a tool for language development and improving literacy skills, rather than making the case for why poetry qua poetry ought to form a valuable part of the curriculum. Over the last decade, poetry education in primary schools has been
heavily influenced by the literacy agenda, emphasizing knowledge of language techniques, textual forms and generic structures. Poetry can therefore be seen as a tool in helping students identify features of language:

Poetry gives teachers an authentic text in which to work on phonics, phonemic awareness, and language development skills such as rhyme, word families, and alliteration. Poems provide a simpler context for students to practice these skills, using text that is at their interest and academic levels. For a good discussion of two historic models of using poetry to enhance literacy skills, Geisel’s The Cat in the Hat series and Kenneth Koch’s Teaching Children to Write Poetry. Although poetry can have such value as part of improving literacy skills and language development, the worry is that the other potential benefits are overlooked, which impacts on the way in which, poems are used in the classroom. For instance, the 2007 Ofsted report comments that poetry is sometimes used ‘primarily [as] a teaching tool for language development rather than a medium for exploring experience’.

In contrast to the educational domain, therapeutic uses of poetry tend to focus on the importance of poetry in personal development, understanding the self and its capacity for self-expression, usually through the creation of new poetry. There are reports of beneficial uses of poetry qua poetry in psychological and therapeutic settings from dementia, depression and schizophrenia treatment to prisons and caring for the elderly, where the emphasis is on ‘exploring experience’ through reading poetry. For example, Billington and Robinson reflect on the use of poems in reading groups for women prisoners, which created strong personal resonances for the group. They comment that after Henry Davies’s poem ‘Leisure’ was read aloud to the group, it elicited some really quite moving talk about ‘prison time’ and using its space to think. One reader talked about a bunch of flowers and how she looked at them with a focus and concentration here that she had never done outside prison. Another reminisced about the ‘time to stop and stare’ her father had had, and sounded a note of regret that she has not always done this. She also looked forward to an imagined future where she could take more time. Such examples suggest that the experience of poetry can offer crucial ‘thinking spaces’ in which to reflect on our lives, thereby enhancing understanding of the self through personal engagement with a poem.

One of the main aims of this special issue is to bring together hitherto unconnected approaches to the study of poetry’s role in different stages of lifelong learning by those working in different disciplines in order to provide clearer evidence about poetry’s educational value, and its roles at different stages of personal development. This special issue, therefore, presents cutting-edge interdisciplinary research on poetry and its uses by experts in education, literary studies, psychology, psychoanalysis, philosophy and actor training in an effort to start to weave together the potential benefits of engaging with poetry identified by these different disciplines to inform approaches to teaching poetry.

The original research presented in this issue collectively argues that poetry has a distinctive value compared with other cultural objects and experiences, not least because of its ability to connect people’s cognitive and affective responses, mind and body, experiences and memories. Importantly, we demonstrate that the value of people’s encounters with poetry can be enhanced by modes of delivery that encourage multiple modes of engagement: through the written word, the heard voice and bodily movement. View all notes that brought together evidence and expertise from a team of eminent and emerging scholars on the uses and values of poetry at different stages of life in order to develop new, interdisciplinary ways of understanding, articulating and quantifying the values of poetry. This issue also draws together some important related projects from the UK, such as the University of Cambridge ‘Poetry and Memory’ project led by David Whitley and Debbie Pullinger, and Philip Davis and Josie Billington’s work at the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society (CRILS), University of Liverpool, in conjunction with the Liverpool-based charity The Reader.

Dominant themes that emerge from bringing these articles together include the way in which a focus on memorization of poetry can reveal insight into the nature of memory, the contribution poetry can make to our well-being, as well as the importance of focusing on both the affective and cognitive dimensions of our engagement with poetry to enhance both appreciation of the work and personal development, all of which have great implications for approaches to teaching poetry in order to cultivate such value.

The article presents the results of a recent survey conducted as part of their Poetry and Memory Project, which sought to investigate the role memorization of poetry, can play in internalising poetry and helping individuals to connect with poems on a personal level. In their thought-provoking article, Pullinger and Whitley seek to understand the relationship between memorization and literary analysis, arguing that the memorized poem can be a source of meaning for the individual to accompany them at different stages in life.

Looking more directly at the role of poetry in education, Jacquelyn Bessell and Patricia Riddell focus on the memorization process itself. In their article, ‘Embodiment and Performance’, they present a small-scale study, which investigated the role of bodily movement in the memorization of poetry; whether performing physical actions in learning the lines of a poem aids recall of those lines. They discuss the results of this study in relation to embodied cognition, which suggests that an embodied approach to engaging with poetry can heighten the internalising of the poem, and thus the ability to recite the work accurately.

Following on from this and taking up the issue of the importance of personal and emotional responses to poetry, Kate Rumbold and Karen Simecek argue in ‘Affective and Cognitive Responses to Poetry in the University Classroom’, that there is a need to cultivate greater affective response in teaching poetry in the classroom.

Volume 11 Issue 3, March 2022

www.ijsr.net

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution CC BY

Paper ID: SR22329164944 DOI: 10.21275/SR22329164944 1542
They introduce recent work in psychology to make the case that affective engagement can lead to cognitive rewards that could not be achieved by taking a purely analytic approach to the poem, and therefore there is a need to rebalance cognitive and affective engagement with poetry in the classroom. They also discuss some of the barriers to taking such affective-orientated approaches to teaching poetry in which they draw on observations from a recent small-scale study.

In their ‘Actual Texts, Possible Meanings: The Uses of Poetry and the Subjunctification of Experience’, Andrew Green, Viv Ellis and Karen Simecek discuss how they recreated Jerome Bruner’s classic experiment exploring the differences in experience of hearing different forms of text read aloud. In the original experiment, Bruner compared a transactional text with a literary text, noting that hearers were more likely to use complex, ‘subjunctifying’ language in reporting what they heard after listening to the literary text read aloud. In their version of the experiment, Green, Ellis and Simecek add in a further layer by considering difference in experience of kinds of literary text, comparing the language used in reporting on hearing a news article, literary prose and a poem. Their findings suggest a heightened use of subjunctifying language in the case of hearing poetry, demonstrating that poetry holds an important place in our exploration of language and meaning.

Reflecting on recent work in neuroscience and research in philosophy on the nature of metaphor, Patricia Riddell explores the human need for creative use of language in her ‘Metaphor, Simile, Analogy and the Brain’ and the differences served by metaphor, simile and analogy. This article outlines the complex brain processes involved in processing figurative language, including the difference in how the brain processes metaphor and simile. Through her discussion, she argues for the evolutionary significance of these important aspects of language use and the educative value of repeated engagement with such complex forms of language in aiding ‘conceptual expansion’.

With the final three articles, we turn to a more practical focus on the uses of poetry. In ‘Becoming Poetry Teachers: Studying Poems through Choral Reading’, Gabrielle Cliff Hodges discusses challenges for the student-teacher in preparing to teach poetry. She argues that student-teachers are often least confident in teaching poetry and are uncertain of how best to engage their students with this particular literary form. Critical of the recent focus on recitation of poetry, which she argues promotes a solitary engagement with poetry, Cliff Hodges argues for the need for a more collaborative approach to engaging with poetry, through activities such as ‘choral reading’. Reflecting on her own teaching practice, she argues that the most effective way of engaging student-teachers with poetry is through reading and exploring together.

Nicholas Bayley offers a practitioner’s perspective of poetry, drawing on his own personal experiences of the value of learning poetry by heart and how this has had unexpected positive results in his psychoanalytic practice. He puts forward an insightful argument for recognizing the imagistic power of poetry and how this connects with our individual perceptions of the world in which we live.

2. Conclusion

Finally, Philip Davis and Josie Billington provide a further exploration of how poetry works for us – the mechanisms at work, again offering a vision of the therapeutic benefits of reading poetry, in particular poetry as ‘offering a place for thinking about [life] without ceasing to be in it’. They suggest the importance of focusing on the experience and value of reading prior to the kind of experience of poetry we have once we have learnt about the poetic structure more formally. By considering this in the context of education, there might be an important role for teachers to play in offering students the space to encounter and value poetry in this pre-theoretical way. There is an immensely powerful experience on offer from a first encounter, further supporting the call to take more care in attending to the rich affective dimensions of our experience of poetry for its cognitive, emotional and social benefits.

References