

DOING THINGS WITH POEMS: REFLECTING ON SIX YEARS OF POETRY BY HEART

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Poetry By Heart, the poetry recitation competition and website was launched in January 2013, and funded by the Department for Education for five national competitions. In spite of its impact, it is currently unfunded, pending further announcements from the DfE; the website and competition infrastructure are being maintained for now by the team which developed it. Co-directors Julie Blake and Tim Shortis outline what has been learned about the value of encouraging young people to memorise and share publicly their chosen poems in spoken form. They draw on recent survey testimony of teachers commenting on the benefits of participation for their students, and for their own engagement with poetry. Their commentary gives a consistent, positive endorsement of the potential of a poetry recitation competition and website to engage students from a range of academic capacities and social backgrounds and from every kind of school. Teachers also value the enhanced recognition of poetry and its potential to contribute to individual wellbeing and collective cohesion. Meanwhile, the future of the competition and its website remains precarious.

Poetry by Heart is a project in which young people engage with poetry for its intrinsic pleasures through the challenge of learning a chosen poem, crafting a performance of it, and sharing it in public space in a competition. Informed, independent teachers of English who have encouraged their students to participate have made this innovation possible. So, it is a pleasure to share teacher comments about this project with English Association members, a body with a strong commitment to the disciplinary background of English studies as well as to young people's literacy. To orientate the reader, we will begin with a few facts and figures about the Poetry By Heart project, then outline the trends of this recent survey of teachers'

views before concluding with an appraisal of the current situation and next steps.

Poetry by Heart is a national poetry recitation competition for 14-18 year olds in England; a website of poetry selected by poets and educators, including videos of recitations and teacher guidance; and a print version of a timeline anthology of 1,000 years of poems written in English, from the Beowulf poet in 1000 to Jacob Sam-La Rose in 2010, each poet given just one exemplifying poem. 2,577 schools in England, more than half, have registered for the competition's resources and well over 500, or more than 10% have participated in county finals to choose who will attend the prestigious regional and national finals weekend, with recitations judged by leading contemporary poets. 80% of participation and 80% of the winners have been from state schools, reversing the common pattern in many poetry-writing competitions, and they have come from cities, towns and villages across England. Contestants also choose just under 80% of the poems which are offered, which runs counter to the current meagre experience of poem options in the assessed curriculum. Poetry by Heart's online website has attracted over one million unique users with five million poem page views, 68,000 in October 2018 alone. Its print anthology is now in its second print run of 5,000 copies. And teachers, lecturers, poets, young people and their families have all praised the project as one of rare significance.

Patterns of response in our teacher survey

We asked teachers why the Poetry By Heart competitions matter, their thoughts about the competition website, and for any particular memories of competition highlights. For most, the framing of Poetry By Heart as a competition was important; it provided a spectacle which showcased poetry in accessible spoken form, giving it a more public focus and vivid presence in the life of the school or college community. For example, a teacher in a city comprehensive that had taken part in for the first time commented: *'It gave our students the opportunity to engage with poetry in a different way. They genuinely loved it. Students did assemblies, poetry readings and brought in poems that they loved as part of the preparation. This has had a lasting impact. When we did Poetry Week in September, we had over 100 entries for the poetry competition. Poetry By Heart is part of what has helped us to raise the profile of poetry in the school.'*

Another teacher wrote about the competition's general contribution to the lives of all those involved: *'Poetry by Heart has had a profound impact on*

our school and has brought poetry into the day-to-day life of the school. We've taken part for the last four years and it has genuinely improved the lives of everyone who has been involved, showing how education and poetry can have an active and lasting effect on young people.' There were other similar testaments to the general impact of the competition on social cohesion and wellbeing.

There is a view that competitions favour more capable, better resourced students at the expense of others; the teachers in this survey disagreed, arguing that the competition was good for students of all abilities, could break through traditional stereotypes, and even attracted some students who claimed not to like poetry.

'[It's] egalitarian – in our school it is rarely the top set who win and the confidence and pleasure it gives the lower ability students is undoubted.'

'I ran the 'Poetry by Heart' competition at two schools [and] it absolutely galvanised interest... broke through gender boundaries, and gave an incredible range of pupils, from macho Rugby players to painfully shy pupils the chance to be rewarded for taking risks.'

'Some students sign up say they DON'T EVEN LIKE poetry! They want to compete because it is a challenge. Learning a poem by heart appeals to lots of different types of students and often to those we least expect.'

There was a commonly voiced view that the competition provided a significant meaningful opportunity to gain experience of managing participation in formal public events. It gave *'invaluable experience of public speaking and performance outside the classroom.'* Being able to participate in a national competition was also viewed as a worthwhile challenge which gave English parity with other subjects. *'National competitions like the Maths and Science Olympiads provide challenges to students who are gifted at STEM; Poetry By Heart is the English equivalent.'*

Some noted the scope for meaningful speaking and listening activities at a time when speaking and listening skills are being squeezed out of the curriculum. *'Opportunities such as those offered by...Poetry by Heart are increasingly rare. If we are to produce articulate young people who have the confidence to stand in front of large groups and present, to lead business and*

industry confidently we have a responsibility to prepare them and support them for public scenarios.'

Although poetry recitation is sometimes stereotyped as the preserve of an academically able, social elite, several respondents commented on the sense of pleasure and accomplishment the competition gave to students of all abilities, and its offer of valuable transferrable skills. *'I teach students with special needs and it gives them a huge boost when they can remember a whole poem by heart AND perform it. On top of the impact on self-confidence, it supports cognition and learning, which carries through into strategies they can use in their GCSEs.'*

Respondents also valued the inclusiveness and mutual respect fostered by students attending to their peers' recitations, mindful of such a hard-earned achievement, irrespective of the social background of the contestant and their school. People learnt from observing *'Our state comprehensive students have shared the stage with privately educated students and felt equal in their abilities and talents as a result of this inclusive event.'*

There was also a commonly voiced belief that learning poems and reciting them gave students emotional support and resilience which they were not able to access from their digital literacy practices.

'In an age of growing anxiety, stress and mental health concerns, poetry, especially that which has been learnt and internalised, can play a vital role in equipping students to navigate the choppy waters of adolescence.'

'Poetry explores the essence of who and what we are. Young people spend... much of their time trying to understand themselves through technology [which] can be...destructive in the way that it distances them from that essence'.

Another respondent referred to a letter she had received from the mother of children 'not always known for their diligence' who had 'spent the Christmas holidays walking around the house reciting poetry, instead of sitting in front of screens'.

Teachers' competition highlights

Poetry recitation can be an intensely moving experience. In part this is the poetry itself in its spoken form. There is also the skill, the sense of risk and

courage under observation. For teachers, competition highlights were often those moments when students were observed breaking through their own previous possibilities.

A young boy who was disengaged in English was able to learn, recite and enjoy a rather long Browning poem.

We have a unit for students on the Autistic Spectrum and our... winner was from the unit. She was thrilled to be chosen and performing for the video was a huge accomplishment for her personally.

Seeing bilingual children engage with poetry in English and our winning pupil went on to be highly commended in the WWI poetry competition!

There was also a recognition of the students changing the way they related to poetry and seeing it as something they could admire and discuss with their peers.

Seeing the bonding between year 10–13 students as they met to discuss and practice the poems.

Students performing great poetry in front of a large audience. Students gathering around to hear great poetry.

180 teenage boys captivated by a stunningly moving delivery of a Shakespeare sonnet.

The Poetry By Heart Website

The Department for Education could not initially fund a website. Thanks to the Oxford English Dictionary team at OUP and other kind benefactors, we were able to raise funding for one. We have been frustrated by how little we have been able to develop it more fully, so it was a pleasure to find that our teacher respondents valued it so highly, and were using it in the way we had intended. The following response is typical.

‘The website provides an astonishing and lively resource that offers everything a reader of poetry would require to engage with and experience a poem/poet. The design is fantastic and we’ve used this a lot and not just within the competition. For example, 6th form students have used it to find inspiration and textual examples for coursework, our creative writing group has used it as a writing stimulus, English teachers have used it for wider reading... It has countless uses and the supporting resources (such as the word definitions) make it totally accessible.’

Another respondent, a Head of Department, used the website ‘to get students to independently engage with poetry, by browsing, reading, and selecting poems that appeal to them, rather than always being prescriptive about the poems that they interact with. It makes poetry more interactive and organic, which helps them to have a deeper appreciation for it.’

Another found it useful for a more specific context: ‘The website is a brilliant resource for the poetry classes I run for marginalised groups... I have heard amazing work after sharing and reading the poems. The reach of PBH goes beyond the competition.’

We have been adding videos of our finalists’ recitations of out of copyright poems since the first competition and it seems that these are particularly valued resource which acts to inspire and model what can be achieved.

The Poetry By Heart website is a medium to hear the voice of young people in a way we don’t usually get to anywhere else on the internet, via the videoed recitals. The positive, empowering portrayal of young people unironically dedicating themselves to emotion, literature and spoken word, albeit for a few minutes gave pupils something to aspire to, and lo and behold, there on the website was the advice, examples and support to help them achieve it – to perform better, to express themselves better, and understand themselves better through words and the medium and power of spoken poetry.

We wanted to use the opportunity of the competition to encourage students to encounter a wider range of poetry from a range of historical periods. Our timeline anthology was selected by poets Andrew Motion and Jean Sprackland and by Mike Dixon and Julie Blake, who represented the perspective of teachers. We made sure that there was sufficient variety of poets that students from diverse heritages could find themselves in their selection. We also avoided including poems which were set for study, and

we gave each poet just one poem so that choices did not focus around a few familiar names so preventing students from understanding the expansive field of English poetry.

It is challenging but supports students with glossed words and poet background summaries. Students love playing around with it and choosing their own poem.

I use the PBH website regularly with students to give them a sense of poetry developing over time (important knowledge for GCSE). It is brilliant for giving students a range of poems they can dip into both for their personal pleasure and to practice engaging with unseen poetry.

Students from all year groups use the website. Often, students' first port of call is an internet search engine and they find it increasingly hard to distinguish between amateur and quality content. Being able to direct them to a website that has a thoughtfully curated range of known and new poetry that students can trust is important.

So where now? where is this project is going over the next six years?

The evidence we have been collecting since 2013, including annual surveys and an archive of 500 videoed poetry recitations, suggests that poetry memorisation and performance have significant potential for extending the repertoire of young people's practices for engaging with poetry. They can also widen students' experience of poems and of the modality of poetry. They usefully supplement classroom learning, and offer new potentials for affective engagement from a wider participation base. For example, preparing poems for recitation foregrounds the musical dimension of poetry and refocuses attention on the spatial details of form, including choices of line break, punctuation and other graphical cues. The experience of observing chosen poems closely as they are being learnt and rehearsed, moves the practitioner away from preoccupation with extrapolating a single semantic meaning; a variety of interpretation is shown as inevitable. Learning a poem by heart appears to give students a quiet authority, and greater patience about mysteries and ambiguities which cannot be immediately understood. There is a stronger sense of ownership of a text which has a material existence in

memory embodied by speech. Preparing to speak a poem is also a process calling for extemporised experiments and judgments as a person attunes themselves to a way of speaking the poem which feels congruent. Learning and crafting a poem for public performance appears to draw on a variety of embodied literacy practices which may have lower barriers to access than the more abstract intellectual discourse fostered by critical discussion of a poem in preparation for an academic essay.

[It has] ‘massively increased our...awareness and enjoyment of poetry: it brings poetry alive, off the page and into people’s hearts.

It offers a tangible way for students who have academic merit but struggle with ‘writing it down’ to be rewarded.

Students learn to empathize with the emotions of the texts, something that can be missed if not performed. I see students flourish who ordinarily don’t engage with the text to the same extent, if left to read silently in class.

Poetry By Heart is now seeking an affiliation with hosting for the website so we can make further developments on a more stable basis. This would include developing our support for freestanding poetry recitation competitions which do not depend exclusively on the nationally-funded model. There is compelling evidence that 14-18 year olds of all backgrounds and aptitudes benefit from the approach to poetry recitation practices fostered Poetry By Heart. Piloting of competitions based on our Children’s Showcase collection suggests that the method can work too with younger children in lower secondary and in primary schools, provided there is a sufficiently extensive and appropriate collection of poetry for them to choose from. But the scope of what can be done will depend on the future of this project’s funding.

Poetry takes the abstract, inscrutable, challenging, wondrous, visceral, cerebral, emotional aspects of our lives to a place where understanding is possible. No other medium has the ability to enable this level of empathetic appreciation and knowing. Poetry, though, is hard, really hard. Poetry by Heart enables pupils to understand poetry by owning it, communicating it, sharing it.

Poetry By Heart grew out of a dialogue with poets and with teachers in schools and we welcome further comments, criticisms and corrections. Write to us via julie@poetrybyheart.org.uk.

In the spirit of Poetry By Heart: www.poetrybyheart.org.uk

We have been supporters of *Poetry By Heart* at Katharine Lady Berkeley School since it began. We have held internal competitions, taken the winners to regional competitions in far flung corners of Gloucestershire and celebrated the participation (if not the success) in those competitions. But we have found that the spirit of *Poetry By Heart* has found its way into other things we do in school.

The website is a fantastic resource. The ‘First World War Poetry Showcase’ can enrich the poetry pupils have to study and allows us as teachers to explore a rich and diverse range of war poetry that goes beyond the scope of most anthologies. The very pleasing chequerboard of Shakespeare’s sonnets likewise enables sorting by theme and or by keyword. The impressive timeline goes right back in time with the earliest poem being an extract from Seamus Heaney’s translation of Beowulf; the most recent is Andrew Motion’s *The Fish in Australia* (2014). With the exciting, albeit daunting, prospect of A-level coursework about any twentieth or twenty-first century poet, the timeline is a gift. Asking students to scroll across the decades and dip in and out of poems by authors both familiar and strange has been a regular homework task. Sometimes, we have asked them to learn a poem, sometimes they read (or recite) their poems out in class, but also and perhaps even more importantly, we have asked students simply to find something they like, because finding something they like is sure the best thing about ‘by heart’.

In the spirit of *Poetry By Heart*, at the other end of the age range, we are using time in the summer term to foster a love of recitation. Under the title of *The Poetry Take-Over* we stop our usual timetable and allow all key stage three classes to spend time learning, reciting, rapping, singing and acting out poetry. All classes are introduced to poems from the canon – not usually on the curriculum – and asked to pick one that they would like to learn. Over several lessons we teach memory skills such as roman rooms and body pegs – skills that they can use in other subjects – and pupils are given the time and the space to learn. Copies of poems appear in unexpected places – I remember one year a particularly disaffected year 10 boy greeting

me with two lines from a poem that had been mysteriously placed above the urinals. He had learned it and was proud to repeat it to me. Carol Anne Duffy questioned Darwin from the walls of the science block and William Carlos Williams spoke of forbidden fruit in the canteen.

Without the usual confinements of assessments and time constraints we have found the joy of learning a poem by heart has found its place once more in education. Teachers talk of passages learnt and remembered, family members recall theirs...pupils stand proudly and recite. The joy of being able to memorise something is a powerful one and has been borne out by generations and nations. Important events are marked by recitations of verses and there is a comfort to be gained from a collective initiative. Pupils have said that they feel proud, not just to perform but to listen to others. One quiet girl in year 8 said on completion of her recitation, 'I feel clever' and I think we can all agree that, indeed, she was. Verses are given new life through new interpretations and pupils practise skills that have served scholars for centuries. During this period around the school we hear pupils rapping familiar verse in the playground, singing and sometimes dancing refrains and strains of poetry and perhaps most importantly, enjoying English literature as a living subject.

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