

Poetry's 4 dimensions

Objectives

- To help students understand the different dimensions that constitute a poem's meanings
- To use videos of recitations to explore these dimensions

Introduction

Once the poem has been committed to memory, it's time to think about how best to perform it. Julie Blake offers some more thoughts from Glyn Maxwell's 'On Poetry', some ideas for exploring these using video of past finalists, and a shared activity for experimenting with the out-loud sound of the poem in performance (with thanks to Gabrielle Cliff-Hodges for sharing her PGCE choral reading activities).

Sunshine, moonlight, sound and shape

In 'On Poetry', Glyn Maxwell describes four important dimensions of poems: the sunlit side of its immediate meanings; the moonlit side of the meanings it gives up more deeply; its musicality; and its visual dimension. The very best Poetry By Heart performances are able, in different ways, to realize those dimensions, not necessarily equally, but in some measure.

In less successful performances the sunlit side tends to dominate. These often treat poems as dramatic monologues to be enacted, with the emphasis on personalizing the voice and drawing attention to the speaker. How much of a place there is for that depends on the poem, but attention also needs to be paid to the cooler, shadier side of the meanings.

The best performers have a good 'ear' for the musicality of the poem, an eye for its shape and a recognition that these dimensions are important to its meaning and how that is communicated and enjoyed. In performance, it means paying attention to sound patterns and rhythm, and to the shapes the lines and stanzas make. Performances in which the poem becomes prose don't fare well in the higher rounds of the competition.

Multiple voices and interpretations

Working with videos of student recitations can be really productive for developing a sense of these four dimensions, especially when there are multiple videos for the same poem.

POETRY BY HEART

Recitation competition

Try John Donne's 'The Good Morrow' or Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's 'The Witch'. Play the different videos and explore immediate ideas about what works in a student's performance, where your students hear the poem differently, and what advice they would give them to bring out the full quality of the poem.

Then look in more detail at the four dimensions. The videos are all of national finalists so they will all successfully realise the different dimensions in different ways.

Look closely at one or two of the videos your students like best. How have these performers realised the sunlit and moonlit meanings of the poem, the sound and the shape? How have they done this through voice, emphasis, pace, tone, and so on?

Exploring the sound of the poem

Start by exploring sequences in the poem that you might want to draw attention to with your voice. These sequences might be particular words, phrases or lines; shifts in tone or speaker; or lines that are especially important in some other way. Think about some of the ways you could use your voice to create different effects. Experiment with saying the poem in different ways using some of the vocal qualities below, and exploring what other effects feel right for your poem:

1. Volume – higher or lower, even or varied
2. Pitch – high or low, rising or falling or monotone
3. Tone – joyful or sad, angry or calm, playful or serious, tender or merciless
4. Rhythm – regular beat, free-flowing, pounding hearts and missed heart-beats
5. Pace – faster or slower or steady throughout

Use this exploration to develop a reading or recitation of the poem, then try it out! If you're planning to enter a Poetry By Heart competition, bear in mind that although the judges are listening for how well you have expressed the sound of the poem, they're not keen on extremes of shouting and whispering, sudden speed and sudden go-slow!

In class you could try choral readings in groups. You might like to think about the additional possibilities this creates for using multiple voices:

1. Contrasts: high or low, male or female, gravelly or reedy, breathy or flat, etc
2. Positions: speakers in different parts of the room, facing each other, back to back
3. Numbers: solos, pairs, speaking in unison
4. Effects: single or multiple echoes, aural ripples, repetitions.

There is no category for choral reading in the Poetry By Heart competition but that doesn't mean you can't have fun with it anyway! It's a good way of building confidence and trying things out.