

The 'unseen' poem

Objectives

- To use the Random Poem function on the PBH timeline
- To develop student confidence in exploring 'unseen' poems

Introduction

One of the challenges Poetry By Heart offers is to get to know a poem that isn't prepared for an exam - exactly the kind of reading needed for the "unseen" option. North West regional development coordinator, Karen Lockney, worked with Susie Cooke at Queen Elizabeth Grammar School in Penrith to trial an "unseen" lesson based on the Random Poem function on the Poetry By Heart website. Then, Caroline Mortlake, Lead Practitioner in English at Beacon Academy in Crowborough, East Sussex read about this and tried it out.

The lesson that refused to be planned

The aim was to use Poetry by Heart web resources to introduce pupils to poems that would be 'unseen' to them, but crucially 'unseen' to us as teachers also. We would try to read and respond to them together. The pupils didn't look 100% convinced. Their views on such questions are probably not atypical: 'We might not understand it', 'What if we don't find the correct meaning?' There it is, the fear that a poem has a 'correct meaning' to be teased out in the pressure of an exam room.

We showed the Poetry by Heart 'Random Poem' feature: press it and one of 200+ poems will appear. We agreed that we'd be honest and tell the pupils if we had a head start but the first poem was 'Blackout' by Grace Nichols which neither of us knew. The poem was read out and the pupils were simply asked to note down and discuss images that leapt out to them, which we then discussed. The overall context did not present itself straightaway, but most of us immediately felt a powerful mood of danger, and we honed in on images and language that gave us that feeling.

All well and good so far, but we were keen to move on. This was all going to be light touch, emphasising the idea that confidence comes with frequent exposure and vehemently denying the urge to analyse every poem. Easier said than done though, as we realised when we got ready for the next poem and one girl said, 'But what does this Nichols one mean?', pen in hand, ready to scribble our pearls of wisdom down. Our response seemed counter-intuitive: 'We aren't entirely sure yet, but we are interested in going back to it later'. It's difficult to tell a pupil that we aren't going to tell them the answer because we don't know it ourselves yet, but this was at the crux of what we hoped to illustrate.

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Recitation competition

We then used the timeline. With a glee for the macabre the pupils chose the 'Nasty Ends' category and then 'How to Kill' by Keith Douglas. We spent longer on this poem, asking each group to learn a 4 line stanza by heart, putting these together so we had a fairly informal class recital. They made light work of this, and it allowed us to ask them more about their own stanza, and what they noticed in those they heard from others. We talked about whether their increased intimacy with the poem had developed understanding. Some very powerful personal responses emerged.

This was the first of regular, sporadic lessons with the 'little and often', 'light touch, deep meaning' approach, and they will complement other lessons where pupils spend much more time with poems, often in more structured contexts. But this sort of risky, 'let's see what we get' lesson does, we feel, have its place to raise confidence with poetry, to take it off its pedestal a bit, allowing the brilliance of lines, images, ideas within poems to shine briefly and randomly, and to allow fresh, personal response to emerge with increasing confidence.

Planning for risk

The starting point for the lesson was the random poem feature on the Poetry by Heart website, pulling out an "unplanned" poem from the excellent anthology. My first challenge was how to make poem available for students to work on as soon as it came up. My solution was a poetry starter - how much of the opening of "Night Mail" can you learn in five minutes? While that ran, a colleague completed the printing for us. Most got the first two stanzas, but some got further, and had fun doing it.

Our chance poem was Christina Rossetti's "A Frog's Fate". Their first challenge was to work out the story, the narrative. And as I started to read it for the first time, I panicked. They wouldn't get it. It was awkward, complicated language, contrived, alien, I could hardly get a grip on it myself. They'd reject it and resent what I'd imposed on them. It would be a disaster. But very quickly, most groups had latched onto to the Frog's death as the key component of the poem's narrative. I said I needed more than that. I gave them another two minutes. Then, going from group to group, I read what they'd got to the rest of the class. One group had absolutely nailed it – and so I was able to ensure that all groups understood that basic narrative and felt secure with it.

Next: questions, feelings, atmosphere. The noise in the room changed. While the class had been trying to get the story, they were fairly loud, with some off task chat as they struggled with it. Now, knowing the shape and outline, they were much quieter, more thoughtful. We were all struggling with the deeper ideas, though. They wanted me to tell them what it meant. This was where not knowing the poem before the lesson really helped. They were seeing me having difficulties, and I was responding to their questions with more questions. We were in it together. Fantastic. In this short time they really got to the heart of the poem and its driving ideas. The discussion as I went round the groups had been very encouraging indeed. A class who need huge amounts of reassurance all the time developed confidence and began to work independently in a way I've not seen before. Three cheers for random poetry selection!