

It All Began with the Moon...

Finding and Keeping Poetry



Sue Dymoke gave the annual Harold Rosen Lecture at this year's NATE Conference, drawing on her own experiences as a student, teacher and reader of poetry to argue that we need to help students to find and keep poetry by giving them the opportunity to read and write creatively.

This summer I was honoured to give the Harold Rosen Memorial Lecture at NATE Conference, as part of the research symposium to celebrate '50 Years After Dartmouth'. The following article focuses on some of the discoveries I made in preparing for this lecture and reflecting on how poetry came to be such an important element of my life. In doing so it explores the nature of language and personal growth (Dixon 1967) which were central elements of the influential month-long seminar held in 1966 at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, USA. In addition, I reflect on how young people can find and keep poetry for themselves in ways that will continue to enrich them throughout their adult lives.

My poetry discoveries began in the summer of 1969 – to be precise Monday 21st July 1969:

*The moon is dark and silent
and always still.*

*There are rocks upon her surface
like a hill.*

*There are craters and sand there.
Beware astronaut beware.*

At some point during the weeks of anticipation leading up to the historic moon landing and Neil Armstrong's first moonwalk I wrote the above poem. I was seven years old. It is the first and only piece of writing that I can remember completing at infant school.

I have previously commented that the composition of this poem marked a hugely significant moment which continues to have resonance today (Dymoke, 2003). What I am interested to consider here is how I came to write it and how I came to find poetry.

The Saturday after Armstrong bounced across the alien surface my Infant school days were coming to an end. Mum and Dad bought me my first dictionary, the *Oxford Concise*. I covered it in sticky-back plastic and carried to school. In the years that followed the signatures of almost all the teachers in whose classes I was most happy were inscribed there. Even now their signatures send me straight back to their classrooms, language labs, netball courts, stages and domestic science rooms.

“My infant school headteacher strived to create a school community in which all were encouraged to recognise young people’s creative potential and achievements.”

Sue Dymoke with Rosemary Davis, once her primary teacher, at the NATE Conference.

Mrs Sharma was my reception class teacher. Her brilliant red and orange saris shimmered along the corridor. She read us five-year-olds wonderful stories and poems during wet playtimes. Miss Acker taught us italic handwriting and thought that the curls of my ‘f’s were never ever neat enough. Mrs James was one of my junior school teachers. Nature was what drove her. She was a huge exponent of the great outdoors as a stimulus for writing. We were forever on field trips and nature walks, sketching, jotting, peering through magnifying classes and binoculars. Thanks to her I experienced, at 8 years of age, the early morning beauty of a misty bluebell wood, learned to identify birdsong, beetles and different varieties of wildflowers. Because of her I wrote and published poems in the school magazine. She made the vital connection between nature and writing and forged an enticing path to for me to follow.

For a long time I have tried to make sense of how and why I was taught in the particular way I was and why I responded with such enthusiasm. As a result of their teaching - not just their English teaching - I became Edward Lear’s Runcible Spoon in our Junior school play (*The Owl and the Pussy Cat went to Sea*), listened in awe to *Under Milk Wood*, savoured Portia’s unstrained ‘quality of mercy’, enjoyed the language of algebra and quadratic equations, puzzled over T.S. Eliot’s mysterious voices in ‘Journey of the Magi’ and always strove to perfect a fast serve on the tennis court. But I want to concentrate on two teachers - one from Infant school and one from secondary school. Between them, they encapsulate so much about my finding of poetry, my personal growth through language.



‘The cupboard with its scarlet-ribboned key’: poetry at infant school

The first of these teachers was Rosemary Clayfield. In the late 1960s she was the newly appointed Headteacher of Letchmore Road Infants School in Stevenage, a fast expanding ‘new town’ in the south east of England. She had arrived shortly after I had first started school. In later life she became Rosemary Davis, an emeritus Professor at the Institute of Education, University College, London.

In *Growth through English*, John Dixon comments:

It has taken the Infant Schools, in their work with five-to-seven-year-olds, to prove that a new and complex relationship is possible between the ‘skill’ elements and the broader processes that prompt a child to use language in the first place. (1967: 2)

He also writes of the need for all pupils to explore the power of language citing the example, from Holbrook’s controversially titled *English for the Rejected*, of ‘Joan’, a young woman of low IQ, who wrote a poem about a little yellow bird that ‘flew into the golden yellow sun’. Dixon notes that such creative work gave educators a ‘new right to talk about the creative potentialities of all children’ (1969: 27). Interestingly, Joan’s poem was drafted during an examination. Given the Hirschian (1987) model of knowledge acquisition that currently underpins public examinations endured by 16-year-olds in England, one wonders if such creative opportunities will ever be offered again.

It occurs to me now that at the same time the Dartmouth Seminar was taking place in 1966, my infant school headteacher was striving to create an inclusive school community in which pupils, parents, and teachers were all made to feel part of a shared learning conversation, in which all were encouraged to recognise young people’s creative potential and achievements. As I was talking to her for the very first time in over 40 years, Professor Davis noted that during her own training (in London at Goldsmiths College and the Laban Centre in the early fifties) she had learned a practical, activity-based approach to teaching the curriculum in which art, drama and music were integral elements.

Poetry featured very regularly in my infant school life. We heard poems in assemblies. We brought them alive through painting, dance and drama. We listened to poems when rain speckled our classroom’s high windows at playtime. We wrote poems. We longed to borrow poetry books from the ‘cupboard with its scarlet-ribboned key’ (Dymoke, 1987: 6). We also read poems on the ever-changing poetry noticeboard in the corridor outside our Headteacher’s office – poems written by Rossetti, Stevenson and Walter de la Mare, poems by other pupils, including my ‘moon’ poem. In reading this poem with hindsight I can see the influence of de la Mare’s ‘Silver’ in terms of atmosphere, some aspects of word choice and the feminisation of the moon as she ‘walks the night in her silver shoon’ (de la Mare, 1958: 106). However, in structure, rhyme scheme and voice my piece is very different. My moon is an ominous place, riven with risk, uncertainty and mystery for the astronauts. One could argue that the unknown silent surface I describe mirrored the uncertain challenges of the blank page on which I was writing a poem for the first time.

‘To boldly go’: poetry as a legitimate act

My abiding memory of that poem is *not* the act of writing it – if only I could remember that! – but the way others responded to the piece – the life it would lead after it had been written. I know that my class teacher, Mrs Buckingham, liked it and showed it to her colleagues. I know that the headteacher pinned it to the poetry noticeboard and that it seemed to stay there for some time. I also know that it was photocopied and possibly displayed somewhere outside school. All of those small events served as a vital and early affirmation that it was okay for me to choose to write poetry. They signalled that it was legitimate to explore an event beyond one’s own lived experience: a trip to the moon – something and somewhere that had been discussed, dreamed about and imagined for the whole of that summer term. It was also okay to voice one’s fears about the dangers that might lurk on the moon surface and to issue a warning to three astronauts whom I would never meet and who were highly unlikely to ever read my poem. Poetry gave me that freedom.

Earlier this year, at Nottingham Playhouse, I listened to the novelist Pat Barker talk about her writing processes. She urged writers in the audience to go into writing ‘wanting to surprise yourself because if you can’t do that then no-one else will be surprised by what you write’. I love the element of risk implied by her approach. You are going out into the unknown in your writing, exploring, as *Star Trek’s* Captain James T. Kirk would say, ‘strange new worlds ... new life and new civilisations, to boldly go where no-one has gone before’. Children and adults who are learning to write continually need to experience this thrilling sense of mission and discovery when they write. That’s what my school experiences gave me. How often I wonder is it still the case for young people in classrooms today?



‘Our inner thought-foxes’: poetry at secondary school

The second major influence on my journey to find and keep poetry was Richard Wallace, an English teacher at The Barclay School, a state secondary comprehensive school. He taught me when I was 11–13 and again for A Level. The activities he chose, his wealth of poetic knowledge and the quality of his written feedback enabled me to learn how to develop my writing and to deepen my knowledge and understanding of poetry. This learning would, years later, feed directly into how I would go on to teach poetry in my own secondary English classrooms.

With his wild wispy hair and flared checked trousers Mr Wallace cut a gangly figure. To inspire us he blew bubbles in the classroom, set fire to things, made us collect new cool words, write ballads and shape poems, haiku and even shorter pieces. Another student’s poem:

*Gone.
She left me.*

was the piece I was most envious of. It stunned us all with its economy.

Through serious fun, our English teacher helped us to find (after Ted Hughes) our own inner ‘thought fox(es)’ and experience the joy of how poetry can make you think – an aspect of poetry teaching which is acknowledged as fundamental (Ofsted, 2007). Looking back over the poetry he introduced us to I am amazed

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at what we covered in the junior years of secondary school. It ranged from *Beowulf* to Elizabeth Jennings, Shakespeare to Roger McGough, Robert Browning to Stevie Smith. The connection between listening, reading and writing was ever present. Mr Wallace used poems as models for our writing but always gave us choices and the freedom to use these as loosely as we wished. ‘My Bus Conductor’ by Roger McGough was one such poem. It led me to write about my grandfather who worked on the railways his whole life until ‘the whistle blew and the last station faded away’.

‘Only connect’: poetry experiences

Mr Wallace firmly believed in E.M. Forster’s instruction in *Howard’s End* (a novel partially set in my home town): ‘only connect the prose and the passion and both will be exalted’. He achieved this by creating a context for sharing poetry together, tapping into events in his students’ own lives and creating new experiences.

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The latter might involve seeing where Keats coughed up blood in Hampstead or by picking blackberries in the scruffy bit of the school car park staining fingers with Heaney’s ‘summer’s blood’.

Mr Wallace was a huge fan of Thomas Hardy’s writing. I discovered his novels in our school library when I was 12 and can still see the smile on my teacher’s face when I told him I had just borrowed *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Immediately he began to quote the novel’s opening: ‘When Farmer Oak smiled the corners of his mouth spread till they were within an unimportant distance of his ears...’ However, it was to be Hardy’s poetry that had the greatest impression on me. Most memorable, was our group’s visit to Thomas Hardy’s cottage in Higher Bockhampton, Dorset. Hardy’s poem ‘The Self Unseeing’ always sends a shiver down my spine. Part of me is forever there in that cottage with our teacher standing in the doorway reading the poem and us, silently, waiting for the ‘dead feet’ to walk in.

Richard Wallace completed his English degree and his PGCE in London in the early 1970s with Harold Rosen as one of his examiners. He remembers little about these training experiences except that, like many teachers of his generation, he learned a great deal of poetry in his undergraduate work and drew on this poetry store in his teaching. This is so different from many new teachers today who may have avoided optional poetry modules in their degrees and may need considerable subject knowledge support in their PGCE year.

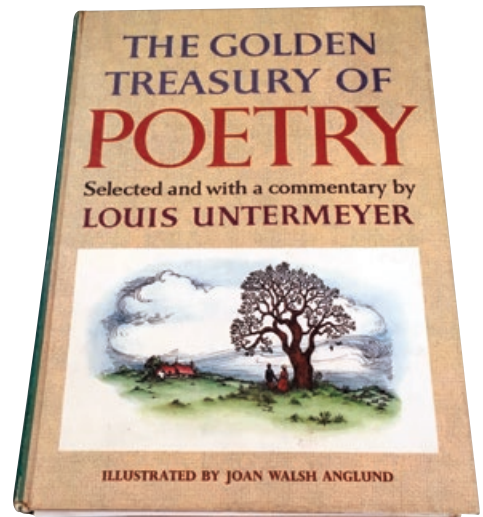
Opening doors: access to secondary discourses

I come from a working class family. My parents both left school at the age of 14. Dad read us *Winnie the Pooh* and *Treasure Island* at bedtime. Mum avoided reading (and writing) unless it involved deciphering knitting patterns or recipes. Neither of them read poetry for

pleasure although Dad did chuckle over some over Pooh’s hums and Mum could recite John Masefield’s poem ‘Cargoes’ from memory. Although not literary people, they knew the value of learning. They made sure I joined the library as soon as I was old enough and I am eternally grateful for that. They indulged my requests for a typewriter and books as birthday presents. One year I spent my book tokens on the beautifully illustrated Louis Untermeyer’s *Golden Treasury of Poetry* (1969) which remains a favourite companion. Here I first discovered May Swenson’s ravishing ‘Was Worm’ with its dazzling compressed imagery:

*Was worm
swaddled in white.*

*Now, tiny sequin coat
peacock bright...*



Beryl Hales – The Writer’s Shed.

The day before I gave this lecture, I came across Beryl Hales' writer's shed miniature which was exhibited in Sherwood Art Week in Nottingham. By coincidence Untermeyer's anthology was one of her favourite poetry books too and it forms the shed's base. I am struck by the significance of this: it seems to symbolise how reading poetry underpins writing poetry.

I went to three ordinary neighbourhood state schools. Increasingly, however, I realise that my school experiences were extraordinary. James Gee notes that 'if you have no access to the social practice, you don't get in the discourse, you don't have it' (2015: 168). The greater the distance that exists between one's primary discourse – the discourse of home and family – and other, secondary, discourses, the greater the challenge there will be to perform effectively within that new discourse. For some poets, like Seamus Heaney, poetry was embedded within the home culture (Heaney, 1980). Not all young people are so fortunate. My teachers opened the door for me to a secondary discourse in that they enabled me to find poetry for myself, to recognise the marvellous economy, precision and distillation of language, to go on finding it beyond the classroom and to keep it close in my head and on the page ever after.

How, therefore, can today's teachers help students to find and keep poetry beyond school at a time when their work is framed by neo-liberal discourses and accountancy models of learning (Dymoke, 2016)? All teachers need support to develop their confidence as creative readers and writers. This cannot be achieved unless time has been carefully allocated – a rare resource within intensive, time-poor courses. Beginning teachers especially need to learn to struggle with words on the page, to trust their peers to critique and support their endeavours, and also to experiment with a set of writing practices and social interventions which they will feel able to adapt for use with their own classes.

Finding Poetry

One writing practice I always use with new teachers is found poetry. Monica Prendergast describes it as 'the imaginative appropriation and reconstruction of already existing texts' (2006, p.369). In its most straightforward form found poetry involves selecting a piece of prose (such as junk mail, a news article, a set of instructions), breaking that text down into new lines or extracting words and phrases to create a poem. It could also involve collaging and combining language from several texts or using verbatim texts. The language is already provided so the writer can concentrate on creative use of cut and paste to find 'beauty in the unexpected' (Manhire, 2009, p.8). The range of subjects and sources for found poetry is endless. Digital technology affords found poets opportunities to cast their net widely for suitable texts. In 2015 my PGCE group's forays into found poetry included: writing a poem about pop star Madonna's fall from grace at a music awards ceremony (sourced from tweets); a piece about the experience of dementia (using blog and website extracts); a valedictory poem for a tutor (drawn from a tutor's emails to a student), and a series of haiku about the ups and downs of teacher life (composed from Facebook status updates). At the end of the course one Newly Qualified Teacher identified found poetry as her 'best' teaching discovery of the year (Dymoke, 2016, p. 69).

An initial inspiration for my lecture was the traditional phrase 'Finders keepers, losers weepers'. In their groundbreaking research on the language and lore of school children (first published in the 1950s) Iona and Peter Opie identified that this phrase was widely used. They also comment on phrases spoken by two children when they spoke the same words simultaneously. In Alton, Hampshire, each child would 'touch wood' and name a poet. If this happened elsewhere children would link pinky fingers, make a silent wish and name a poet. If they lived in London or Edinburgh the poet should NOT be Shakespeare or Burns: 'not Shakespeare because Shakespeare spears the wish; not Burns because he burns it' (p. 334). The two poets usually named were Keats and Shelley. It would be fascinating to know if this saying still exists anywhere in the UK today (and whether Keats and Shelley's names are spoken). Let us hope that somewhere, children have also found new poets, and Zephaniah and Agard or Nichols and Kay, Dharker and Nagra or Duffy and Rosen are named and wished for.

Keeping poetry

The moon still holds a fascination for me (*Moon at the Park and Ride* is my second full collection) and personal poetry discoveries continue. In most cases these are of single-authored collections rather than single poems which are so often the limited experience of students when they study poetry in school. This year so far I have enjoyed fine new work by Nancy Campbell, the Foyle Young Poets of the Year, Nancy Gaffield, Jan Wagner and Cliff Yates along with 'Rain Won't' by Kenji Miyazawa, one of Japan's foremost 20th century poets, and the magnificent poem 'Hermit Crab' written by Peter Porter in the last year of his life in which he contemplates 'this shell I soon must leave' (2015, p. 53).

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The poet Audre Lorde insists that:

Poetry is not a luxury it is a vital necessity of our existence ... Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so that it can be thought (1977, p. 419)

I agree that it is an essential element of self-expression and our spiritual lives. We should weep to think that so many young people could be turned off poetry and that some might, as Michael Rosen puts it in his provocative 'Bear Grylls' poem, 'die of poetry' (2015, p. 212) because of their examination experiences. If they do, they will lose touch with its strength and beauty.

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John Dixon emphasises that students and teachers need to 'work together to keep language alive and, in doing so, to enrich and diversify personal growth' (1967, p.13). I have been fortunate to connect with poetry through so many different means. Teachers first sowed the seed of my interest. They helped me to locate it as a desirable destination. I firmly believe it is our responsibility as a teaching profession to ensure that all our students and future teachers are similarly enabled and equipped to go on finding, choosing, writing, keeping and making poetry happen for themselves for the rest of their lives.

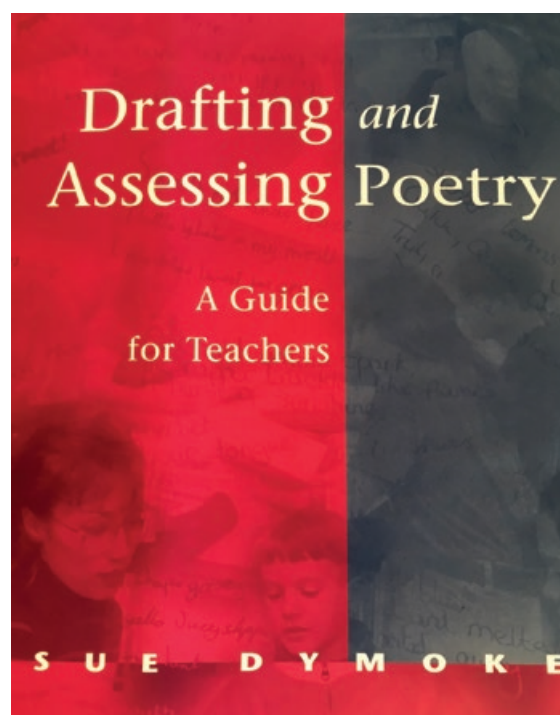
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A video of Sue's lecture may be viewed in the members' area of the NATE website.