

A STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH TO TEACHING POETRY

Anissa SBOUI (Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Sousse, Tunisia)

anissasbouil@gmail.com

Abstract: *The main objective of this study is to identify the substantiality of the student-centered approach in teaching poetry at faculties, and demonstrate the learners' direct response to it. Then, there will be a move to one case study; the practical part is charged with an insightful analysis of Anne Sexton's "Music Swims back to Me". The design of the course is meant to encompass diverse steps, ranging from incorporating data show, video recording through 'spoken poetry'¹, as well as handouts. The foremost figure of confessional poetry of the mid-twentieth century has been selected to show the efficiency of student-centered method in deciphering verse texts by spotting the light on the pre, while and post reading along with the different challenges learners can face and the benefits of this approach in their critical thinking skills.*

Key Words: *Student-centered, teacher-centered methodology, spoken poetry performance, Tunisia*

Teaching poetry offers the literature instructor some of the most fundamental, immediate, active, even physical ways to engage students in learning

Elaine Showalter

¹Marc Smith is believed to be the creator of 'spoken word poetry' for having organized a number of events (in the memory of the Beat Poets of the 1950s) in Chicago, Illinois in the 1980s.

• Introduction

When teaching poetry, instructors must bear in mind that they have to review their own perceptions on this sensitive field of study. The traditional way of approaching this genre has shortcomings in terms of students' potential to decompose poems. In this article, the emphasis on the benefits of teaching poetry from a student-centered angle will enable poetry learners to foster transferable skills such as problem-solving and critical thinking. Elaine Showalter's aforementioned quote explains the importance of 'engaging' the learner in the "physical" learning process because once they feel motivated, they develop a great appetite to be creative, active and independent throughout the poetry session.

The rupture with an old-fashioned instructional way of teaching is essential for them to boost their sense of autonomy, reflective abilities and help them be involved in inquiry, discovery and opening new horizons for their future endeavors. This is why the heavy burden is placed on the teacher's shoulders to create a favorable teaching atmosphere whereby every learner feels connected to the realm of prosody, and starts to work his mind for the sake of fathoming the depth of poems. There are hurdles that the teacher has to surpass in order to be able to simplify the syllabus and incorporate sophisticated texts to remove the allegation circulating around the fact that students are more familiar with drama and fiction over poetry for various reasons.

• The Benefits of Teaching Poetry

Some critics claim that 'poetry is dead' because of the decreasing interest in poems in comparison to the expansion of drama and fiction. Gabriel Rutherford, in "Is Poetry in Decline", inquires whether this genre has turned to be "the sick man of the arts?" or not. He sketches two important factors behind such a claim. An introspection of the miserable conditions of a number of poets has also been a direct cause of the demise of interests towards prosody. Robert Burns, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Theodore Roethke, Thomas Chatterton, Mary Ann Evans, known by her pen name George Eliot are prototypes of poets who tied the knot with suicide, perished penniless, decried as 'lunatics', thrown in bedlams just to have their works published (N.p.). Besides, the emergence of the Beat Poets of the 1950s with O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg has resulted in the evolution of hip-hop, poetry slams, raucous and free verse poetry. In *The Paris Review*, Harold Bloom critiques the upsurge of these new forms since "these accounts" are "[un]bear[able]" enough to bring about "the death of art" (379).

In an article, entitled "'Poetry is Dying': Creating a (Re)new(ed) Pedagogical Vision for Teaching Poetry, Edwin Creely presents another reason behind this decline by relegating it to the absence of a clear strategy in teaching poetry in classes for many years. Besides, this specific genre has been widely repulsive because of its inefficiency. To better explain this argument, Ofsted purports that the demise of students' passion about studying poems is inextricably intertwined to the collapse of the "quality" of the teachers' potential. They are less optimizing for assigning some hours on

exploring the magic world of verse form. This reluctance has affected the learners' appetite for reading or writing poems (Creely117).

“Weaknesses in subject knowledge” has aggravated the educational status since teachers themselves lack insightful background on this domain. They cannot provide sufficient data on this field of study, bringing about a simultaneous drop in students' desire to fathom poetic texts. Not being well equipped with the adequate tools to analyze poems by great poets belonging to a variety of movements, teachers have pushed learners to swerve away from furnishing an increasing eagerness towards breaking the silence by exhibiting much interest in poems. The process of exploring the life situations in which the poems have been written, along with the power of language, whether clear or implied in any given verse text, have to be amongst the teachers' main responsibilities. Their job consists in making them feel more motivated to be able to decipher poems without “reticence” on their parts (Creely 117).

Creely adds that the specificity of poetry culminates in the “brevity and economy of words”, the “use of complex imagery” and “its roots in oral language” (117). What he wants to punctuate is that such distinct features can represent a blocking barrier to learners who have been more used to studying prose. The unfamiliarity of the genre complicates the teaching situation, for they may have negative attitude towards poetry that seem complex enough to be decoded. Here, learners have to make efforts to read between the lines to be able to decipher implied meanings.

This is why, teaching poetry in universities is essential to motivate students to develop a new appetite for this interesting genre. The role of the teacher here is substantial to embark on assigning activities, designing new techniques with reliance on flipped classrooms, ICT and relying much on spoken poetry for the sake of boosting learners' interest for poetry courses.

• **Teacher/ Student-Centered Approaches**

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On a lot of levels, when a poem is presented well, you'll see students who have been quiet suddenly look up, speak up. The poem has awakened something. A few days later, you might discover alliteration showing up in students' writing, or unusual word choice, or sentence variety. In the midst of a literature discussion, a student might refer to a poem ... taken by surprise that poet ... had arrestingly different takes on prejudice, love or loss. (Janeczko 182)

Comparing the teacher and student-centered approaches seem evident on the process of instructing poetry to students. The overall aim of claiming the centrality of the student-centered model is to make sure that learners encapsulate a great appetite for reading a poem without displaying any sense of reluctance. They will eventually be “taken by surprise” since the act of reading a verse text “has awakened something” in them that has long been entombed because of the reasons listed above.

Before eliciting the benefits of the learner-based approach, it is evident to underline the inefficiency of the traditional model. Donald Schon, Bernie Trilling, Charles Fadel and Lorin Anderson confirm the lack of students' empowerment of their autonomous skills within this approach since no open investigation or inquiry can be attested. Mary Huba and Jann Fred sing in tune with these critics in demonstrating that the teacher is but information giver, not utterly involved in the learning

procedure. The teacher-centered approach inculcates the primacy of the teacher's input rather than the role the student has to play. Being the fount of knowledge, the instructor is expected to dominate the learning process. S/He is akin to a God-like figure for the talking time is manipulated by the teacher solely. The extension of the course book, the weaving of the four strands of speaking, listening, writing and reading into the tapestry of the teaching arena as well as the learning outcomes are mostly conducted by the commander-in-chief of the whole curriculum (Scheurs and Dumbbravaneu N.p.).

As a deductive, expository teaching whereby learning style is not flexible, the teacher-led instruction is more about telling than inducing information. What the teacher is doing is a simple act of lecturing using chalk and talk angle. On the other side of the learning harbor, students take notes with no intervention. They are passive receivers of information. There is no room for their personal growth or learning creative thinking because of the primacy of the communicator, the only source of knowledge and the leading figure in class. Learners become disengaged, disillusioned because they function as inactive figures, barely able to interact or express their own standpoints. They neither contribute to the poetry analysis nor delve into critical thinking or problem solving possibilities as everything has been monopolized by a chief executive teacher whose mission rests on monitoring, correcting learners' errors, interrupting utterances, choosing topics, and answering most of the questions.

On the other side, the student-centered model has relied on what learners are able to accomplish upon the completion of the course. This outcome-bound approach identifies to what extent they have potential to achieve at the end of the poetry lessons. Singing in tune with the 'constructive alignment', learner-based model demonstrates how students can 'construct' their knowledge with reference to well-designed tasks on the part of a teacher whose basic target stems from motivating them to become active members within the learning process. Inductive, inquiry and constructive learning is enhanced within this style of teaching. He has to help engage the peer learning so that they turn to switch from being reluctant into dynamic figures, deeply involved in formulating their own understanding of the main features of poetry courses. The student-centered approach is also equated with LOLALA which refers to the three pillars of the alignment principle: 'learning outcomes, learning activities, learning assessment'. In this respect, teachers are bound to design activities that meet the needs of learners, eager to solve problems that would lead them to parallel the requested learning outcomes.

The steps to a good curriculum design hinges on the use of technology. The unabridged presence of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) is quintessential in teaching under the umbrella of a project and problem-solving based learning. Embedding e-learning, blended or distance learning into the syllabus magnifies the best transfer of information to learners, potentially enabling materials for educational reforms in return. To strengthen the relevance of education and to boost competitiveness within digital work spheres for learners, technological innovation has been efficient in finding ways to facilitate learning process, a sustainable tool for improvement integral to the education strategy to bring about remarkable shifts by offering personal engagement, unleashing creativity, boosting teamwork skills, allowing autonomy and independence, a tool in the armory for transcending obstacles to leverage learners' involvement, minimizes bureaucratic burdens on teachers and

saves much time in lesson planning, magnifies the purposeful research and enhances critical evaluation on several subjects. Teachers can spice up their classes and raise students' interest in poetry (Scheurs and Dumbbravaneu N.p.).

The direction of travel for the abundant use of ICT has grown in response to the needs of learners. Its incorporation has had huge impact on their penchant for encapsulating oral presentations. Mercer and Wegerif stress the substantiality of enhancing the speaking abilities in classrooms. The composition of oral passages has turned to be of great importance, giving learners opportunities to become a part of the global IT territory through bestowing their technical competence and communication skills. This creeps into teaching 'spoken poetry' as an efficient tool for encouraging learners to engage within the realm of poem analyses without any sense of terror (Soneye 187).

Barr and Tagg underline the primordial shift from instruction-based teaching profile into constructive one. They are for a substantial transition from the traditional way of learning into a more integrating mode whereby the receivers play an integral part in the propensity for decision-making. In this respect, Huba and Freed label it as a 'student-centered assessment' by taking into consideration their role within the whole educational system. Collins & O'Brien consider this new mode of teaching efficient for:

[S]tudents influence the content, activities, materials, and pace of learning. This learning model places the student (learner) in the center of the learning process. The instructor provides students with opportunities to learn independently and from one another and coaches them in the skills they need to do so effectively. The SCL approach includes such techniques as substituting active learning experiences for lectures, assigning open-ended problems and problems requiring critical or creative thinking that cannot be solved by following text examples, involving students in simulations and role plays, and using self-paced and/or cooperative (team-based) learning. Properly implemented SCL can lead to increased motivation to learn, greater retention of knowledge, deeper understanding, and more positive attitudes towards the subject being taught. (qtd. in Froyd and Simpson N.p.).

McCombs and Whistler corroborate with Collins and O'Brien in raising awareness on the importance of SCL, providing fertile ground for the advancement of "critical" thinking and "greater retention of knowledge". Students are equipped with "team-based" approaches to teaching that fit the criteria for SCL, transforming them into "co-creators" with fervent desire to contribute to their personal growth as creative thinkers and proficient communicators (Froyd and Simpson N.p.).

Amongst the various activities opted for by the teacher in ICT are setting up the camera and embarking on reading poems aloud, video recording can be an efficient tool in motivating learners to become proactive. To avoid disruption in poetry classes, it is fundamental to design research-based learning through assigning poem analyses with recourse to laptops, class digital cameras, iPods on reading, Power-Point presentations, video conferencing, and displaying radios in class or submitting poems on the drop box. Another relevant technique rests on teaching poetry through dance or music to get learners highly involved in real-life experiences.

- **A Student-Centered Approach to Anne Sexton's "Music Swims back to Me"**

It is crystal clear that Anne Sexton's "Music Swims back to Me" has been selected to be the case study. To make the lesson come to life, the pre-reading stage is designed in the form of a flipped activity by watching a video, on YouTube, that the poetess recorded decades ago. The choice of initiating the course on 'spoken poetry' is intentional to furnish the learning moment with vivid, livable and enriching encounter with a proficient poetry writer. While listening, students enjoy a promising atmosphere to get familiar with reading a verse passage. Discussion on the revealing aspect of the title has been held to spice up the session with interaction and creative thinking abilities. They have to explain it, paying much attention to the prevalence of the word 'music', and predict what the text is going to tackle.

In the while-reading step, students are given handouts, for profound analysis of "Music

Swims back to Me". Their mission resides in deciphering the thematic input, figures of speech, and the life situation of Anne Sexton for the bulk of the poem hinges on subjectivity. The abundant use of the first-person voice is telling to help uncover the basic themes for the personal happenings of the American confessional poetess are closely intertwined with the major occurrences embedded in the poem. The life situation seems essential to investigate this particular poem since it is Sexton's first "breakaway from adolescent lyrics" (Kumin xxxi). Juggling with words and grappling to liberate the voice is through the juxtaposition of two divergent states in a rhythmic and musical style. "Music Swims Back to Me" overlaps a myriad of feelings and thoughts, paralleling the swift oscillation between various moods in the first stanza and in the rest of the stanzas. At first glance, darkness fuels the inevitable seclusion a woman feels at the worst places on earth. The dislocation is obliterated by the rhythmic coherence that music creates. Beside the linguistic strength, the female body parallels the production of poems through the hegemony of music. All of a sudden, her pessimistic mood switches to merriment. She is stronger as a female after fathoming the clues of music. She is able to sing:

La la la, Oh music swims back to me
And I can feel the tune they played
The night they left me

In this private institution on a hill. (Sexton 7-10)

Equally important, music is another wing along with the pen which functions in favor of woman's liberation and artistic expansion. Music is an incentive; a dynamo, allowing Anne Sexton to divulge an outstanding place within the literary world. Having a redemptive power to alleviate her agony, it is the lifeblood for a gifted confessional poet who strives "to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new" (Cixous 876).

Then, students decipher the poet's departure from the past and the move to a new phase. They recognize how the deliberate alternation between the past and the present tenses in "Music Swims Back to Me" parallels the speaker's turbulent life. A transformed woman almost turns a bleak page of her trauma to write a novel one on a virgin paper. In other words, she puts the past on her back and seeks a coherent self by creating something promising out of the prior ashes. The discrepancy of her state of mind and mood is well articulated by the use of the past when she relates both her agony and the patients' loss in the asylum: "Everyone here was crazy" (12) during "the night they left [her]" (9).

The figures of speech are under scrutiny to marvel at the poem's implied meanings. The personification of music and the use of action verbs show its influence on the female body when it moves in a rambling way. It is vibrating thanks to music which mirrors the female quest for meaning. Swimming has a connotative dimension of the struggle to fight the repulsive waves of the masculine forces. Music, which fights like waves, is a metaphor for the speaker's ability to regain her senses and cognitive skills to reconsider her self-discovery and self-regard. Music does not only swim, but also:

Pours over the sense
And in a funny way
[It] sees more than I.

I mean it remembers better. (Sexton 14-7)

The personification of music foreshadows its therapeutic impact on a woman's exhausted body. It is akin to a magic stick to heal the rifts and cure her mental pain. Thanks to the power of "singing in the head" (23) the female speaker has "forgotten all the rest" (24). Music has an inevitable ability to alleviate her mental anguish. Being "lock [Ed] in [a] chair at eight a.m." (25) in "the strangled cold of November (19) ... through the bars to stick [her] (22)" have aggravated her sense of loss. A detailed description of such repulsive experience intensifies her identity crisis. Music is able to "see more than [her]" for it "remembers better." Music may be a substitution for the senses and cognitive abilities a woman has been deprived of. It can see, remember, and swim. It means that such a woman can see and remember thanks to the songs she is listening to. She avows her reliance on such a redeeming tool to uplift her to higher stages. Her body is released, her spirit is freed and her quest for identity is reconstructed. In this particular poem, Sexton's style is unique like Gerard Manley Hopkins who "invents ... and uses repetitions ... but he does not lose rhyme" (Mc Rae 29). Opting for repetition punctuates the great impact of "Music":

And the song that remembers
More than I, Oh, la la la,
This music swims back to me.
The night I came I danced a circle
And was not afraid.

Mister? (Sexton 28-33)

"[M]usic swims back to me" (7-30) is repeated twice, and "danced in a circle" (13-31) is reiterated twice to foreshadow the celebration of the duality of the body and language. In other terms, as the "radio [is] playing" (11), a woman embarks on dancing and singing. Listening to music motivates her to survive as it releases her body. It moves with every single "tune they played" (8) in an attempt to foster her ability to shake it in a rhythmic way. Indeed, her voice is reconstructed as soon as music is played. "Music Swims Back to me" also mirrors how the speaker struggles to find herself amidst this chaotic world. The song has the power of "moving [the female body] in the corner" (3). A woman does not turn a blind eye to music which has an inspirational effect on her body. She dances because dancing suits her. This thirsty body has to dance and keep on dancing; to sing and keep on singing to reach an utmost ecstasy.

Charles Baudelaire juxtaposes the physical movements of the body with penning verse texts when he says that "[d]ancing is poetry with arms and legs." (1). At the

post-reading level, the aim of incorporating dance is meant primarily to indicate the tight link between music and poetry; then it helps motivate students to improvise the written words. By so doing, I want to stress that “Music Swims back to Me” can be taught through dance as it actually fits the very mood of bodily movements. Then, I venture to revive students’ buried interest of poetry learning into a fantastic performance that will be engraved on their hearts and minds.

Petra Kupperts postulates that dance in classrooms grants green light to students to be fully engaged. Through her lens, there is strong connectivity as the “body is echoed by and echoes through poems”:

Dance allows me to articulate the simultaneity of experiences, and the delight of merging words and movement, sounds and meaning. Simultaneously, my body is echoed by and echoes through poems, emotion, motion. The traditional tools of poetry criticism do not easily allow me to share how deep these movement sounds signify to that other presence in my body, the other gravity that pools and shifts with each gesture, each step: my pain (N.p.).

The motivation that this post activity has aroused magnifies students’ potential to first reread Sexton’s poem with recourse to bodily movements, and then embark on the process of writing a short lyric poem with the dance platform on mind. This new pedagogical avenue is suitable enough to revitalize their interest in this stagnant field of study. It is relevant to get them highly encouraged to experiment with the dance rituals purposefully. As poetry dwells on the mind, the dance thrives on the body, and here lies the very complicity. From a learner-based teaching perspective, the necessary transition from ‘spoken poetry’ (diffused on YouTube in the pre-stage) into a more engaging ‘physical’ work is quintessential to spot the light on the need for creating an interesting atmosphere for poetry instruction. The classroom performance is to be as inclusive as possible for the kinesthetic experience does matter in circumstances where poetry has often been perceived as a boring genre.

Assigned under the scope of group work, each reporter (chosen collaboratively) has to initiate a fruitful debate that illuminates how to read each stanza while shaking bodies, and varying tone and mood at the same time. Then, s/he stands up, breathes well, reigns over the classroom and reads “Music Swims back to Me” with stretched arms and legs as well as expressive facial features. Here, the student fits the very mould of what Matthiessen calls “private poets”, who stay within their poetic ivory tower, make minds up to write, publish works in journals without planning to recite his texts in public (584). To determine the extent to which music swims back to the speaker is at the core of this assigned activity. Dance experience adds flavor since students are requested to use melodious voices when applying spoken poetry (expression of feelings like laughter, tension, anger, wrath, relaxation, merriment etc.).

Then, they sit again as teamwork and take their laptops to write a short lyric poem, envisaging bodily performance that has to accompany the composed verse text. The integration of learners within this musical and physical scene intensifies a transcendental moment. There is utter fusion of poetry teaching with dance and mobile improvisation. While listening to soft music, they write the assigned poems, bearing in mind that the next step hinges on improvising words through dance. The substantiality of using their body parts and moving around the classroom is a backlash to the allegation that poetry has been static and useless.

• Conclusion

The deep analysis of “Music Swims back to Me” has paved the ground for an increasing appetite on the learners’ part to discover the obscure world of confessional poetry. This research paper has investigated that mingling a number of student-centered activities can meet the diverse learning styles because one size cannot fit all. Having different learning profiles, the design of analyzing Anne Sexton’s “Music Swims back to Me” has been through the pre, while and post stages. The richness, with which the sections are imbued, has demonstrated that a new spirit hovers over the centrality of the student within the teaching tapestry. The search for integrating paths to implement varying resources in the classroom has been one of the main preoccupations of the teacher whose prime mission is to empower students through a transitional method of teaching poetry. The evolution from teacher-centered to learner-centered teaching has become a reality. It is related to competences that have to be identified and described thoroughly. The reliance on the e-learning approach has shown its efficiency in raising critical thinking skills.

One observes the essence of rethinking the poetry teaching system as a whole. That’s why, data show, handouts, and the incorporation of reading and writing poems with reference to live performance have been efficient to the creation of a profitable context of poetry analysis in class. The predominance of ICT makes the student-based learning a holistic experience for the novice learners, eager to explore the ambiguous territory of prosody. Staying connected to technology has added immense value to the quality of teaching “Music Swims back to Me”. Completely different from the traditional way, exempt of vivacity, innovation or creativity, Student-based learning thrives on visual, constructive and time-saving pillars. The incorporated activities in the curriculum have been advanced by the teacher to motivate the students, and come up with fruitful outcomes in which they already have taken part.

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