Being allowed: negotiating space for poetry writing with Literature examination students

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Abstract

This paper focuses on issues of permission and the space for creative writing practice which emerged from a day-long poetry writing workshop with UK English Literature students aged 16 -18 funded by the University of Hull's Bridges to Everywhere project. Drawing on critical frameworks from Hall and Thomson (2017) and Harris and de Bruin (2018), pertaining to artistic practices and creative pedagogies, it seeks to explore how poetry might flourish in the classroom. It does so by outlining and discussing a set of distinctive practices identified in one writer's approach as she guides students through a workshop experience to make their own choices about their poetry writing. The paper considers particular challenges for creative practitioners and for students, concerning agency in learning about poetry within school curriculum confines. It concludes by posing some questions about how such creative practices might be sustained within a post COVID 19 educational environment.

Keywords

A level English Literature

Artistic practice

Creative space

Poetry

Creative Writing

I. Introduction

We had three initial aims in planning this paper. First, we wanted to give an account of how a poet engaged with the creative and practical challenges posed by a recent university outreach initiative involving a daylong workshop with literature students nearing the end of their school careers. Second, we wanted to locate that work within the context of

some recent research into creativity in schools. Third, we wished to describe and reflect upon the attitudes towards poetry writing which the young people (and their teacher) involved in the workshop shared with us. We used the phrase 'initial aims' in our opening sentence because, since planning and submitting this paper for publication, the context within which we worked has changed dramatically. This has necessitated the addition of a fourth aim: the opening up of a discussion about how creative practitioners might adjust their schools' outreach work to the demands of a post-COVID 19 world.

A word about the use of voice in the paper. Both authors teach pedagogy and literature within the Higher Education sector; but for the purposes of this paper, we took the decision that in Section III Sue – who, as a published poet, planned and ran the workshop – should respond to the challenges and affordances posed by the project from the perspective of a creative practitioner. We hope that this dual 'academic/creative' perspective will be of interest not only to educators but also to artists working with young people within and beyond the classroom.

The poetry workshop took place in a mixed secondary school in the north of England. Most of the 16 participants were Advanced Level English Literature students. There were 13 females and 3 males. Their ages ranged from 16 to 18. The workshop was funded in 2018 by the University of Hull's *Bridges to Everywhere* outreach project. The title echoes *Bridge for the Living,* the title of Hull-based poet Philip Larkin's commissioned response to the opening of the Humber Bridge in 1981 (Larkin: 1988). Larkin's casting of the bridge as a 'metaphor of human connectedness' (French, 1993: 85) resonated with one of the project's fundamental aims: to explore how physical and metaphorical space might provide both a frame for identity and a means of crossing boundaries. This focus upon space helped to orientate our thinking, not only about the themes we might explore during the poetry workshop itself, but also in terms of the issues we wished to consider when planning and conducting the intervention.

II. Creativity in the school classroom: threats and opportunities

Two papers proved particularly helpful. The first and most recent was published by Harris and de Bruin in 2018. As well as providing their own comprehensive, contemporary review of the literature on creativity in education, Harris and de Bruin draw upon an earlier systematic review of 200 studies concerning teachers as creative practitioners (Davies *et al.* 2013). Harris and de Bruin's own research into the key characteristics of what they call a 'creative ecology' (2018, 215) involved interviews with 75 teachers from Australia, The United States, Canada and Singapore. Participants from all four countries endorsed the principles outlined in the summary of Davies *et al.'s* systematic review. They stressed the importance of a commitment to risk-taking, playfulness, non-judgemental scaffolding and to a cross-discipline, collegiate

approach to teaching. When asked to identify the main impediments to creativity in their classrooms, they noted an over-emphasis upon assessment, together with 'a "crowded curriculum", onerous levels of oversight, and documentation and repetitive paperwork' (2018, 226). They feared that educational policies favouring the so-called STEAM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) would leave little room for specific arts or humanities.

As educators working in the English Higher Education sector, what struck us about these studies was the radical challenge that their findings pose to the way curriculum space is currently configured within the English secondary school system. By choosing an educational framework predicated on a series of *core* and *foundation* subjects, the 1988 National Curriculum – inadvertently, perhaps – created a hierarchical division between areas of knowledge. Thirty years later, the consequences of this decision continue to exert a particularly negative influence on arts and humanities subjects in precisely the ways that Harris and de Bruin's research participants feared.

Whereas Harris and de Bruin focus on the creative pedagogies valued and/or practised by teachers, the second major paper we consulted, (Hall and Thomson 2017), approaches the issue from a different if geographically narrower perspective in that it analyses twelve case studies of creative practitioners from a range of artistic disciplines working in schools. Like the teachers in Harris and de Bruin's paper, Hall and Thomson's practitioners find themselves equally at odds with current established educational practice, driven by a 'signature pedagogy … of English schooling' which revolves around a time constrained, objective-driven and rigidly structured tri-partite lesson design (2017, 110).

What applies here to creative practice generally is equally applicable to the teaching and learning of poetry in schools. Reflecting on the neural systems of the brain which have evolved to support symbolic language, Riddell argues, like Harris and de Bruin's teachers, for collaborative approaches to creative challenges. She envisages a creative space for poetry writing far removed from the time-poor, objective driven classrooms observed by Hall and Thomson:

> The more experience we have with unusual metaphors, the better able we are to understand new metaphors when we meet them. Providing students with relaxed environments where they can be encouraged to day dream and focus on their internal world can help provide these experiences and thus build the necessary networks. (Riddell, 2016, 372)

Hall and Thomson's case study analysis identified 'a repertoire of nineteen practices that were rooted in the key characteristics of the artists' approaches' (2017, 112). These nineteen 'distinctive practices' are in turn grouped under

five headings:

- Artists carefully managed time and space
- Artists consciously worked with stories
- Artists looked for ways to make an occasion
- Artists made sure the classroom was a highly social and sociable place
- Students were encouraged to be artists (2017, 115 – 116)

In effect, Hall and Thomson demand that schools be given permission, radically, to open up their spaces – physically, structurally and mentally. They contrast 'the default school position of locked gates and doors' with 'permeable' schools which are 'willing and more able to let the outside world in' (2017, 110) and where creativity thrives. Successful creative practitioners, they note, challenge the 'default pedagogy' of the timetabled lesson by establishing a "third space" which might last for a 'special day, week or project … relatively independent from the ways in which the rest of the school operated' (2017, 110). Conventional school-based attitudes towards time can be challenged not only chronologically but also as it were existentially. For example, Hall and Thomson note a simultaneous focus on what has been learned previously and what needs to be learned to ensure future achievement. In a comment reminiscent of Csikszentmihaly's account of *flow* (1990), they argue that creative pedagogies 'have a profound emphasis on the here-and-now' - being 'fully focused on and living in the moment' (2017, 112).

No less important is the opening up of educational space in terms of discourse, power relationships and definitions of *success* (McAbee 2020). If school students are truly to 'be encouraged to be artists', they (and their teachers) need to be allowed to do as artists do, which means, crucially, to enter what Green *et al.* describe as the 'uncomfortable place of "unknowing"' (2016, 359). By giving each other permission to enter that space, students and teachers have an opportunity, as Sawyer puts it, to break down the 'rigid divisions' between them and instead 'jointly construct' that 'improvisational *flow* [our italics] of the classroom' which is, he argues, essential to creative learning (2011,15). Such a joint construction predicated on *cognitive playfulness* (Tann and McWilliam 2008) opens up a mental space for modes of discourse not normally associated with exam and league-table focused classrooms: 'daydreaming, provoking, brainstorming [sic] and commemorating'. It can even, as artists know, sanction the possibility of 'sometimes failing miserably" (Harris, 2014, 18). Nor are such classrooms receptive to the ways of working with stories described earlier as one of Hall and Thomson's five criteria. 'I begin my story of myself', Butler writes, 'only in the face of a "you" who asks me to give an account' (2005, 11). Too often, in the context of the secondary poetry classroom, that 'you' is represented by an examination paper and the 'account' takes the form of a critical essay whose real purpose is to act as

some kind of vocational bargaining chip. The creative practitioners observed by Hall and Thomson acknowledge instead that, as De Souza puts it, 'both the self (I) and the other (you) are *mutually implicated* [original italics] in each other's story' (2015, 43) and thus '[s]tories make it possible for us to overcome our separateness to find common ground and common cause' (Jackson 2002, 15). They use 'analogy, anecdote and personal history' and a 'widely shared interest in local and community stories' to 'build connections' by encouraging trust and reciprocity (Hall and Thomson 2017, 113, 115).

Much as teachers might endorse the 'distinctive practices' described by Hall and Thomson, it is understandable if, feeling overwhelmed by the structural and ideological forces ranged against them, they look to practitioners who operate beyond the constraints of the school system to carry the creative torch on their behalf. If valuable logistical and financial resources are to be invested in an artist's visit, then the expectation is that, like some kind of superhuman, they will take on the full force of the entrenched educational establishment and, as Hall and Thomson put it, 'find ways to make an occasion' (2017, 107).

The pressure of expectation here is significant; and it is enhanced by Hall and Thomson's fifth criterion: to ensure that the classroom is 'a highly social and sociable place'. The commitment to sociability is not only informed by a fundamental belief in creativity as a communal activity; it also encompasses inclusion in its broadest sense. Hall and Thomson note that the artists they observed 'began with the view that all children and young people were capable of having ideas, making meanings and participating' (2017, 111).

Differentiation, personalised learning and special needs teaching are some of the most complex and elusive of pedagogical skills. Yet here, too, the expectation is that the visiting artist will shine where experienced teachers might struggle – and all this in a context where league table pressures may be exerting a negative influence on the educational experiences of vulnerable young people.

III. Planning and implementing a poetry workshop in school: challenges and distinctive practices

In this section Sue, as creative writing practitioner, uses the critical framework provided by Hall and Thomson (2017) to describe first and then to discuss the specific challenges and distinctive practices identified in planning and running the poetry workshop.

Use of time and space

As the literature review has suggested, the purpose of inviting a creative practitioner into a school, or any other

environment, should be to enable new creative experiences and practices to happen, to shed new light on ways of thinking and creating. In planning the school workshop, I needed to be mindful of the curriculum context (A level English Literature), and where my work might be seen to sit within or alongside this. Nevertheless, I did not want to be too mindful: a workshop should not be constricted by assessment requirements or seen as a quick fix for boosting test scores or heightening progress trajectories. Instead it should provide a newly carved out learning space. Many of the practices that I introduce could take years to percolate through into young people's writing. With this freedom, inevitably, comes a sense of responsibility. I want students to think differently about their relationship with poetry and to gain something positive from their new experience which might have a significant impact on their view of poetry beyond school.

A workshop is often a different duration from a conventional lesson. It needs to be if the experience is to replicate actual creative processes. The poetry workshop started later than the students' normal lessons and lasted 4 hours, split into two blocks of roughly 2 hours which straddled lunchtime. This 'extra' time, over and above the timetabled allocation for English A level, had been negotiated by the English teacher with other curriculum leaders and the Head Teacher. Conventions such as how a lesson is usually divided up were also different, both in terms of time devoted to specific activities and the nature/ordering of these events.

The creative content of the workshop explored awareness of space, through its particular focus on journeys and through specific activities. For example, a free writing activity at the beginning of the session helped participants to loosen and stretch their minds, to move into a new zone of concentration - just as someone might warm up before a running a race or playing a match. The activity began with the word 'journey' as a prompt. Students were asked to write down everything that came into their mind when they heard the word. They were to write *without stopping* and not to worry about punctuation or structure until I told them to stop a few minutes later. They could write to the edge of their page or use the page space as they wished but they should not lift their pen from the paper. Students then read back over their notes and highlighted any unexpected, surprising phrases or word combinations stimulated by the free write. They could be shared with a partner if they wished or kept private. The words could form a starting point for a poem that they might begin to write in the same session or years later. The students had complete free choice about whether to use or ignore them. This free or automatic writing approach has been integral to my pedagogy since I first experienced a version of it at workshops led by poet Peter Sansom (Sansom 1994). I use free writes to introduce the idea of a new writing space for storing ideas and early draft material. This could be a digital space, such as a mobile phone, or a small notebook.

Another workshop activity associated with the University of Hull *Bridges* metaphor involved students recalling when they had first visited a place or made a memorable journey. The students created their own journey sketches, on A3 paper, and annotated them with symbols, words, thought bubbles, labels or anything which symbolised feelings, experiences and reactions during travel and arrival. They then traversed this newly sketched space with a partner, talking together about how they felt, responding to their partner's questions and adding further annotations. The students did not move on, as might be the case in a more conventional session, to write poems directly about their journeys. Instead, they were given time to think about what they had said and written during both activities.

Conscious working with stories

When introducing the mapping activity described above, I talked about my first trip to London aged 6 to see *Cinderella on Ice*, scoffing sweets till I was nearly sick and how I thought the silver underground train was like a glass carriage. While talking, I simultaneously mapped some highlights of the trip on the whiteboard, visualising the journey with words and images. This personal sharing was used to establish a trusting environment, one in which students would feel safe to choose how much they want to reveal about their own lives.

I used a rich mix of poetic voices in workshops including poetry written by young people in order to signal that everyone's stories are important: they can be transformative, starting points for writing. I showed a video clip of slam poet Eben Roddis, a *Slambassadors* winner when he was 15. His *Dust in the Wind* seems to have been recorded in his bedroom. It is raw yet controlled, confrontational yet full of humour and wordplay. The poet speaks his mind, calling his audience up short for how they have attempted to label him. His poem underlines why young people should be allowed to make their voices heard. I also chose materials which were intentionally provocative, to stimulate new ideas and introduce the students to writers who are rarely part of the official examined English that they may have previously encountered. For example, I shared *Open to the Sky*, by contemporary poet Matthew Clegg. It opens with 'England – my England – amounts to this:/a Hull-bound train stalling by a landfill'. It presents a less than enchanting picture of Britain through the setting of a train which has ground to a halt with passengers making the best of their surroundings, some snapping endless photos. Another piece was *What we know* by Kerry Featherstone in which a narrator describes the known aspects of horrific journeys from Afghanistan to the Sangatte refugee camp in Calais, contrasting these with what is unknown about the beauties and terrors of the 'soft valleys of the Ghor' where they once lived. I did not ask the students to discuss or annotate these poems, as they might conventionally do and did not hint at the possible links between Clegg's poem and Larkin's *The Whitsun Weddings*. Instead, students were asked to pick out lines or words that

struck them and to talk about these with a partner. The poems helped to set the scene, to indicate creative potential of all kinds of journeys and thus provided options for the young writers to refer to, act on or reject when they began their own writing.

Occasion making: workshop language and sociability

Although I did not arrive dressed as a dinosaur (Hall and Thomson 2017, 116), I wanted to signal that the writing workshop was a different occasion, one in which participants could be invited to step further into a creative community of writers that they might want to join. Just as the redistribution of temporal and physical space signalled that the workshop was a distinctive experience, the language and materials used also highlighted its differences from a usual class. In this instance, the language associated with Assessment Objectives, Learning Objectives and acronyms for annotating texts or structuring of writing was deliberately avoided.

I had very little prior knowledge about the individuals I was going to be working with. Therefore, there could be no expectations about how they might respond, behave or what they might create. The workshop could be said to be like a fresh notebook page or a blank screen - agenda free, inviting new discovery, a highly social and sociable place, a place for talk as well as for listening to others and to one's own internal ideas. It can take time for participants to become more familiar with these new ways of working (as was shown in the course of the poetry workshop) but, when young writers begin to acknowledge and use their increased freedoms, they can develop a greater confidence and sense of ownership about their writing.

Being allowed: encouraging students to be artists

A main driver of my artistic pedagogic practice is to carve out space for young people to make creative choices away from the confines of examination outcomes and curriculum boundaries. This space is for thinking, listening, daydreaming, losing themselves in less restricted trains of thought, however momentary these acts might be. Therefore, as their guide, I encouraged them to break protocols, to take risks by going off the beaten track into uncharted wilderness so they could begin to discover for themselves the 'errors that give a new start/...the many places a road can't find' (Stafford, 1986, 99). I focused on opening up choices of form, topic, language, limiting the amount of structured guidance offered and providing space for individuals to shift through various possible starting points to find what seems important to them. I did not shy away from using technical language such as discussion about line breaks, titles, rhythms or use of white space on the page. In the workshop students wrote freely, sketched discursive journey maps, chatted

about some poems and finally looked at fine artists' images of journeys. They were asked a range of open questions about the postcard images they had selected and left them to decide which questions they wanted to explore. By this point they had amassed a wide range of material to draw on which they could choose to combine in several pieces, write it up as individual poems or ignore completely. The journey theme hovered in the background but the extent to which each student referred to this subject was entirely up to them.

IV. Student and teacher responses: reflections and recommendations

It is worth noting that some of the workshop practices used during the day (such as free writing) might be more familiar to educators and students in other contexts. However, in working with and observing the group it was evident that previous opportunities to write poetry in this educational context had been very limited. This was demonstrated in how students began to approach tasks that they were introduced to as well as their oral comments during activities, their questionnaires and post-it note responses. The apparent lack of familiarity with these approaches amongst most of the workshop students was endorsed by their English teacher. She also commented in her interview that teachers and students needed the time and opportunity, which could perhaps be made available through a 'three-year GCSE' (i.e. a differently structured High school programme) so they could undertake 'a sustained look at writing their own poetry'. Her school had not chosen to offer the short-lived A level in Creative Writing but she would 'love' to have the opportunity to teach writing at Post-16 level and to enable students to submit their own writing for assessment as part of the A level English Literature specification.

Oral comments and questionnaire responses indicated that the students predominately associated poetry with unseen criticism, examinations, analysis and inference and writing about poetry. Their diet of poems was from examination anthologies and one A-level set text *The Feminine Gospels* (Duffy 2002). One of the 16 students had participated in extra-curricular creative writing classes and a second had entered some poetry competitions. At the start of the day students commented that poetry study was 'important' in order to 'improve skills', raise 'issues' and to help them 'discover meanings'. Several appeared resistant to poetry, privileging the power of prose over what might be achieved through poetry and describing the genre at a remove from their lives as part of 'the literary world' and not something they might connect with out of timetabled hours. None of this contextual background was a surprise. Sadly, it reflects the situation previously reported (Dymoke 2002; Lockney and Proudfoot 2013). Only Harriet, who had participated in some extra-curricular creative writing classes, appeared to perceive poetry as something more than a feature of her taught English programme. She made a connection between poetry and community: 'poetry is a very old form of communication and sharing stories'.

The students' writing was not highly polished by the end of the workshop. That outcome was not expected by either of us. The hope was that they would be able to work on their poems further afterwards. As Jackie Kay advises: 'if they want to be writers then they have to rewrite, like Beckham practising his free kicks for hours before doing them for real' (Dymoke 2003, 66). Some pieces were much more complete than others with recognisable stanza structures and pared down language. Many had working titles. Between them the students had written 24 drafts. Everyone wrote at least one draft while eight of the group wrote two or more distinct different pieces. The visual stimuli (i.e. their journey maps and postcards) appeared to provide useful triggers for their writing. Those who wrote single poems seemed to combine elements from notes and sketches made during different parts of the workshop so that their own journeys became woven in with the artists' images they had selected. 14 of the students referenced a postcard image in some way in their writing.

Given greater time and opportunity to work with students and staff, either face-to-face or virtually, Sue, writing in her role as poet and workshop leader, says she would want to move the group on to additional journey-related writing in new ways such as using place names and house numbers as starting points for structuring new pieces. She would also want to engage in professional discussions with the whole team of English educators, as she has done in other contexts, about how they could effectively support the young writers to develop further, by, for example, revisiting their previously drafted work after it had been allowed to go cold for a week or so. Although none of this was possible, due to the fast-approaching examination period, the English teacher's own departure to a new post and project funding, it is perhaps useful to consider how this next stage might have unfolded. In doing so, this might provide additional insights into what a writing classroom could be like - space permitting.

Space for further writer reflection, questioning and supportive critique would be key elements in the next stage of this writing process. Group sharing and response activities would extend what was used during the day visit (namely, reading aloud a partner's work in progress and providing several focused positive comments and questions at key stages in the writing) towards lengthier, more penetrating discussions about particular poems. These processes would be modelled on writing conferences originally developed by Graves (1983) and workshop response approaches used by Sansom (1994), Dymoke (2003) and Locke (2015). The format of response and feedback sessions would need to be carefully negotiated. How each feedback group was constituted would be an important consideration to ensure that all the writers involved felt well supported and sufficiently confident to question others constructively about their work and to choose how they might respond to comments about their

own drafts. The first of these sessions could involve the poet in modelling a feedback session, educators as facilitators or observers within the groups and students choosing to take on a variety of roles.

Additionally, there should be space for one-to-one student-poet dialogues about the body of draft work that each writer had produced so far. These tutorial-style events would draw on process approaches used by writing mentors at Arvon residential creative writing courses and other established writing programmes. They would provide opportunities for in-depth discussion allied to an individual's perceived writing development needs. For example, there might be a focus on a writer's diction, the need to eradicate clichés, delineation, their uses of form across a range of pieces, further creative risks they might take or how they might move towards potential publication.

V. *Being allowed:* encouraging students to be artists in new spaces

In looking back at this workshop now, in the cold Covid-19 light, it seems that the need to carve out space for creativity within curricula – at any level- is even more pressing. If we reflect further on the Hall and Thomson (2017) framework**,** use of time and space remain vital considerations. Subject content and boundaries are being renegotiated as governments and education institutions argue about lost learning, revised assessment methods and the progress of students who have potentially missed many months of scheduled learning in school, college and university (Burgess and Sievertsen 2020). Simultaneously, educators are reflecting on how they might apply their own pedagogical beliefs and practices to address these new, frequently changing contexts, through ways of teaching and learning which synthesise blends of face-to-face, synchronous and asynchronous experiences. Learners are having to rapidly adapt too and to face up to different challenges which might require them to learn virtually, perhaps with limited bandwidth or access to technology, and alongside students or staff whom they have never met face-to-face. The students' sense of time, how it is divided up in a typical day of learning, the nature of their assessment or submission deadlines, when and where there is now space in their heads and their homes for concentrated writing, may well have changed. For creative writing practitioners, used to teaching through face-to-face workshop environments, one of the biggest challenges appears to be how can they establish that same level of trust, that open sharing environment which was central to their practice? In terms of 'Conscious working with stories', how can creative practitioners provide opportunities for young writers to work through the multitude of unexpected, new and challenging situations they may have had to confront since the introduction of COVID

lockdowns? When addressing the sense of occasion-making and the sociability of the workshop experience, how can educators learn read the virtual signs when students raise their hand online or place an ambiguous comment or emoji in a chat space or decide not to turn on their camera or to unmute themselves? How can all involved in these processes mediate the technology so that collaborative practices and constructive critiques can be used for the benefit of creativity?

Like many HE practitioners, the two researchers in this study are exercised by these challenging ways of working whilst simultaneously excited by opportunities that they also present. The digital spaces and functionalities carved out through Microsoft TEAMs or Zoom, Skype, Google Hangout and so on can bring students together in different ways to edit their work in real synchronous or asynchronous time as whole groups or sub-groups working together in their own distinctive channels using online shared notebooks which can be private, visited or overseen by the HE educator. These new spaces require careful moderation and support if they are to be more than token replacements for face-to-face engagement. Such platforms can bring students together in different grouping arrangements which are, potentially, bounded differently by time from more traditionally scheduled taught sessions or by geographical proximity (Allen *et al*. 2020). There is, therefore, an increased potential for students to access to other young people who are writing, performing and publishing in different communities, time zones and for engagement with new listeners, viewers, collaborators and even publishers from beyond the usual reach of their work as teachers like poet Kate Clanchy, have already begun to show[i]. HE practitioners are discovering strategies and ways of staging e-learning (Salmon 2011) which will be more familiar to HE distance learning tutors and other colleagues who may have embraced the use of wikis (Dymoke 2011), moodles and discussion boards long ago. There is clearly a need for a greater sharing of practice across the whole sector but also a need to reflect on what academics, who are also authors, listeners and viewers, have recently experienced in their own lives as long awaited book launches convert to webinars with multiple writers in different time zones and they are made dizzy by repeated online meetings. Clearly safe-guarding, privacy and data protection regulations must remain primary considerations when carving out these new spaces for student writers but being allowed to be creative could and should be a very different prospect for young writers from 2020 onwards.

[1] See for example: Clanchy, K. (ed) (2020) Unmute: Young Voices from Lockdown: Kindle Edition.

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[i] See for example: Clanchy, K. (ed) (2020) Unmute: Young Voices from Lockdown: Kindle Edition.