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'This might sound silly but…': a critical investigation into how creative use of poetry teaching supports students' learning of a curriculum set novel

Olivia Marsh

(PGCE English, 2016-2017)

email: olivia.marsh2012@hotmail.co.uk

Abstract

This study explores how the class novel can be taught using a holistic approach to the English curriculum, incorporating poetry into the study of a novel. The investigation focuses on a Year 7 class using performance poetry and copy-change poetry writing techniques in conjunction with the class novel Rooftoppers by Katherine Rundell. The study explores the benefit to students' understanding and enjoyment of poetry being taught alongside the novel; the ways in which poetry study can enhance understanding of the themes of the novel; and if memorization is improved through either performance or copy-change poetry writing.

'This might sound silly but…': a critical investigation into how creative use of poetry teaching supports students' learning of a curriculum set novel

Olivia Marsh

Introduction

This study's aim is to explore how performing and writing poetry can facilitate making connections across texts, facilitate textual analysis of both poetry and the novel, and promote enjoyment and a deeper understanding of poetry. My impetus for focussing on poetry stems from the GCSE English literature exam comparing poetry which, as of 2016, includes an unseen poetry element. My experience in GCSE English lessons studying poetry led me to reflect on the anxiety surrounding unseen poetry and disengagement with the poems from the anthology. As Sue Dymoke stated in *Finding and Keeping Poetry* (2016), "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 poem, 'die of poetry' because of their examination experiences" (p.32).

My objective with this teaching sequence is to promote love of poetry and an understanding that there are multiple ways to interpret a poem and make connections across texts. The measured response from this research includes testing students' memorisation and encouraging writing and performing poetry as a means to better understand and engage with poems. This was prompted by recent changes to the English GCSE exam specification, where students are required to recall from memory or paraphrase the set texts in their exams and an unseen poetry element has been introduced (OCR 2016). These changes, I have observed, have caused some amount of anxiety in both students and teachers, and in an attempt to remove this anxiety, I wanted to explore poetry teaching techniques which would build students' confidence when coming across poems and explore the effect performance or writing poems would have on aiding students to remember the text.

In 2012 Ofsted reported a concern that there is "an inappropriate emphasis on tests and examinations" (Ofsted, 2012, p.13) and that this is having a negative impact on the English

curriculum. Specifically mentioning poetry in the report, it states: "Weaknesses in the teaching of poetry include an emphasis on analytic approaches at the expense of creative ones" (p.44). I therefore felt a focus on teaching poems linked to the class novel (the set text studied by the class for narrative study) which involved analysis alongside creativity would be an interesting approach. With interpretation at the forefront the work was designed around activities a year 7 class would enjoy: creative writing, performance poetry and artistic interpretation.

Contextualising the project

This research project took place at my placement school, an 11-18 girls' school in Hertfordshire, with academy status. The research was conducted with a mixed ability year 7 class who were undertaking a scheme of work on modern novels; this class were studying *Rooftoppers* by Katherine Rundell (2013). The school takes a holistic approach to the curriculum, teaching different skills through the modern novel unit of work with key assessment foci: being able to understand, describe, select and retrieve information, events or ideas from texts and use quotation and reference to the text; and use a range of strategies, including accurate decoding of text, to read for meaning.

The performance of poetry fulfils the Key Stage 3 curriculum requirement from the Department for Education (DfE) as follows: "improvising, rehearsing and performing play scripts and poetry in order to generate language and discuss language use and meaning, using role, intonation, tone, volume, mood, silence, stillness and action to add impact" (DfE, 2013, p.6). In addition it states that "Pupils should be taught to: write accurately, fluently, effectively and at length for pleasure and information through: writing for a wide range of purposes and audiences, including: […] poetry" (p.5).

Literature review

My research divides into literature solely on performance poetry and on poetry interventions where the researchers may have incorporated elements of performing, writing and reading to achieve their aims. The initial focus of the literature review is performance poetry.

Performance poetry

I was interested in Gabrielle Cliff Hodges' (2016) research on choral reading, where a group of English PGCE students were given the task to devise a performance of a poem and fill in questions on the poems performed by other groups, having been through the same activity during the PGCE course myself and finding it very rewarding. Although Cliff Hodges' research was conducted with a small group of PGCE English students likely to have a strong knowledge bank of poetry, the underlying principles and structure were starting points for my plans for students to perform poetry. The PGCE students worked in small groups on different poems, rehearsing, devising, and then performing for one another with a booklet to fill in for each performance. Contemplating what students would gain from the performance, I was struck by the idea that

> "Choral reading of poetry, though, has notable classroom benefits for students from the outset, whether listening, discussing, devising, presenting or reflecting. The pressure of creating a choral reading for performance impels students to debate the poem's meanings and the ensuing dialogue is usually reflexive because participants make connections between the poetry and their wider knowledge of life in order to understand what each poem means."
>
> (Cliff Hodges, 2016, p.377)

Cliff Hodges observes that "the overall effect seems to help them better understand the poems" (p.382) which is one of my learning objectives for the performance poetry lessons.

The purpose of Bessell and Riddell's (2016) research on *Embodiment and Performance* was to evaluate how acting helped people to remember a poem which is useful for students at GCSE who now have to memorise quotes, or paraphrase the poems for their exams. This study therefore opened up the idea to me that more than just gaining a deeper understanding of the poems through performance, this could be a useful memory aid. Bessell and Riddell hypothesise

> "If pupils are engaging exclusively with the written word, then opportunities to connect to embodied cognitive processes are extremely limited. It is therefore possible that encouraging pupils to act out poems could increase their memory for, and potentially understanding of, poetry by providing additional resource through which poetry can be interpreted."
>
> (Bessell & Riddell, 2016, p.327)

However, this research is contradicted by Cliff Hodges' (2016) findings in her interview with PGCE English trainees who performed a choral reading. While the PGCE students were not performing to remember, the responses stated that individuals remembered other groups' poems but found it difficult to recall their own poem as clearly. Interestingly, Bessell and Riddell note that

those memorising the poem and adding movement to aid their memorisation had to delve into the deeper meaning of the poem in order to create a movement, furthering the idea that performing aids the understanding of the poem itself. Evaluating the results of this research, I do not consider the evidence to be convincing that any method they trialled of performing, or not performing, strongly improved the memorisation process. I would also suggest that the control groups in this study are problematic, as are the subsequent participants in the study, as poetry experts, members of the public and actors from an acting school were used as the different research groups. The limitations of this research in relation to my aims are that it was based on adults from very different backgrounds and it was a small-scale study. While I will not be replicating the methodology of this research, I am interested in the ideas that embodied cognition presents, that moving and performing the poem will enhance the memory. Bessell and Riddell's study argues that

> "acting out poetry has the potential to create access to an additional resource for interpretation of the words on the page – specifically, an embodied representation of action within an environment. We have demonstrated that this increases memory for the poem, but it is also possible that it will provide a deeper understanding of the poem through embodying the words in action."

(Bessell & Riddell, 2016, p.332)

I will be testing the idea of embodiment and memorisation as part of my research on performance poetry to explore the concept with a class of year 7 students.

Pullinger and Whitley (2013) interviewed small focus groups of teachers from Key Stage 1 through to University on their perception and link between poetry performance and what can be gained from it. They were seeking to answer two questions: What value does the performance of poetry have? How might performance in poetry teaching be reconceived as a more integrated strategy? Their findings from all their interviewees was a sense that "a culture of performance is essential for developing appreciation and understanding of poetry; conversely, a culture focusing almost exclusively on the written text may short-circuit sensuous, embodied and emotional apprehension" (p.162). I would suggest that this research is limited from the interview perspective because of how few people were involved and they already professed themselves to be enthusiastic about poetry. Pullinger and Whitley observed that most teachers of poetry teach via a mixture of two approaches

> "Through the experiential model, the value of performance in its own right is asserted as a means of cultivating enjoyment of poetry and unconsciously developing the responsiveness of the inner ear. […] In practice this is much more difficult than it sounds, and performance of the poem tends to become a prelude to the 'real' work of analysis and interpretation, in which sound plays a relatively minor part and rhythm is almost completely ignored. These models therefore tend to pull apart from one another, with the second increasingly predominating as students move up the educational ladder."
>
> (Pullinger & Whitley, 2013, p.165)

In Margaret Moroney's (1998) research entitled *Poetry in motion* I was interested to find a similar PGCE research project which explored poetry through dance. This was a small-scale study with one class which is similar to the research I will undertake. Moroney hypothesises that if children can see, hear and speak poetry, there is a place for them to move to it as well (p.299). Moroney suggests from her feedback questionnaires and video recordings that the elusive elements of poetry analysis which can be so hard for students to grasp when they are sitting analysing poetry at their desks such as rhythm and mood are much more easily accessible to the students through a dance interpretation. I find the idea that students will physically feel the poem and become a part of it very engaging and I am interested to explore this further.

Writing poetry

The second focus of my literature review is on writing poetry. I wanted to explore the ways in which students can be encouraged to view themselves as writers and poets; and how this can help them to develop an appreciation for the writer's craft and foster an appreciation of poetry.

Schillinger, Meyer and Vinz (2010) conducted an intensive semester-long poetry class in secondary schools in their research entitled *Poetry immersion: Reading, writing and performing with secondary students*. Their objective was to create the experience of a sustained poetry study and use a qualitative set of criteria to assess the value of such a program. This research differs from my own in its length and because it is based in the United States, which has a different curriculum and assessment. The teaching was over five months and the students met twice a week, for a total of seven hours spread across two days. Unlike in my research, these students elected to work in this class rather than it being naturally incorporated to the unit of work. This would suggest an initial interest in poetry which may skew the participant sample (p.111). In the class students wrote in multiple genres of poetry and engaged in a wide range of reading experiences. Students published their work, read it to a variety of audiences, posted their poems on a wiki-space, produced a film in which each student spoke about their favourite poem, and created a traditional hard-copy anthology.

The data collected for this study came in the form of recording from the lessons, collecting teaching materials, students' writing, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires and self-evaluation forms (p.112). As will be seen later in the Methodology section, my research methods were similar to this study in that it involved analysing the students writing, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires. I used students' reflections as part of my research and followed the method of writing poetry alongside the students and replicated the copy-change style of writing poetry as it would have been accessible to the year 7 class. Additionally, the authors note it "leads to a deeper interrogation of the original" (p.113). I was interested in the idea of students as writers, and the teacher working with students collaboratively, not as the one with the answers to the poem's meaning but as a co-producer of work. I felt this created a safe space in the classroom for students to write, as the teacher was modelling this behaviour.

In the paper *Writing the Unseen Poem: can the writing of poetry help to support pupils' engagement in the reading of poetry?* Lockwood and Proudfoot (2013) created a small-scale project that used action research to explore ways of engaging pupils further in the study of poetry. Similar to my aims, the research sought to respond to the introduction of a question in the UK GCSE English literature examination focused on unseen poetry. The central research question was whether the writing of poetry can help support pupils' engagement in the reading of poetry. The research was conducted in an 11–18 secondary school with a mixed gender, C/D attaining Year 10 GCSE focus class. The weakness of this research is that it is a small sample size and older than the students I will be working with, but with largely the same aim to increase confidence in tackling unseen GCSE English literature unseen poetry examination questions. It is also different in that the class is set by attainment and the group I will be working with is mixed attainment. The integration of reading and writing in the teaching of poetry is a strategy that the authors argue can be used to engage pupils in the skills they will need to succeed when dealing with unseen poetry at GCSE. The research was composed of three lessons which combined brief analysis, students writing their own poetry, completing cloze exercises and teachers modelling poetry writing and analysis for the students to copy.

Students had to read their poetry to their partners with the purpose that:

> "reading their work to their partner, with the partner having to ask a question about what they thought it meant and to describe how they responded as a reader …form[ed] the basis of the idea underpinning the research: the pupil is the writer, sharing their work with a reader, and listening to that reader's view of their work."
>
> (Lockwood & Proudfoot, 2013, p.155)

Students had to complete a short written response answering two questions which were written following the pattern of the examination questions on the unseen poem: How do you think the speaker of the poem feels about what they are describing in the poem? How does the poet present their feelings about the subject of the poem through the way they describe it? The results of the action research were positive where 95% agreed with the statement "The lessons made you feel more confident about doing unseen poetry in the exam" (with 5% choosing not to answer this question), which was also the view of the class teacher: "The fear seemed to have been taken out of the exam for them" (p.157). Therefore, pupil engagement in the reading of poetry, particularly in the context of the unseen poem, seems to have been heightened through the poetry intervention.

After taking the literature into consideration I formulated a set of questions that I wanted to answer in my own study, some of which are similar to the questions posed by the different research I explored.

Research questions

Through my research I endeavoured to address the following questions:

1) What will students gain from writing their own poetry?
2) What is the value of performing poetry?
3) Can students effectively make connections between a novel and a selection of poetry?
4) Which classroom experiences might foster creative and personal poetic engagement in the English classroom?
5) Which learning methods are effective for the memorisation of poetry?

Ethical issues

While devising my research, I completed an ethics checklist in order to consider any ethical issues that could be involved in this research project. I gained permission from the school regarding the collection of data. I worked closely with my mentor who is also the class teacher to ensure that they were fully aware of all of the activities that I had planned so that I could be confident that the research I was undertaking would not harm any of the students involved. All of my plans were discussed with my mentor and any amendments to my plans were approved by her before being carried out. Before commencing my research and whilst formulating my plans, I read the guidelines from British Educational Research Association (BERA) regarding educational research. BERA states that all participants "should understand the process in which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary" (BERA, 2011). I made sure that all students involved understood their role in the project, the interviewing and data collection processes. The guidelines emphasise the importance that the researcher should "operate within an ethic of respect for any persons involved in research" (BERA, 2011). I committed to this through giving fair and equal treatment to all members of the class I was working with. Specific guidelines in relation to children state that

Article 3 requires that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child must be the primary consideration. Article 12 requires that children who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, commensurate with their age and maturity. Children should therefore be facilitated to give fully informed consent (p.6).

They also state that "Researchers must recognize the participants' entitlement to privacy and must accord them their rights to confidentiality and anonymity, unless they or their guardians or responsible others, specifically and willingly waive that right" (p.7). Therefore all of my questionnaires were completed anonymously and the names of the students from both my observations and interviews have been changed in my presentation of results.

Outline of teaching sequence

Three lessons were taught in sequence at the end of studying the class novel *Rooftoppers* by Katherine Rundell. Prior to starting this sequence, I had introduced plenary activities to the class's main lessons which required them to write lines of poetry inspired by an image of Paris as a bridging activity between studying the novel alone and studying it in connection with poems. The plenary involved me sharing my own rhyming couplet inspired by the image and sharing my poetry-writing methodology of listing a few words or phrases, trying out a couple of different lines, editing and re-drafting. I encouraged students to take the same approach and to share with a friend to help them if they could not think of the right words or rhyme in this instance. Lines of poetry were shared with the whole class by students so that the whole class took part in poetry writing, editing and listening to poetry read aloud, prior to starting this mini unit of work.

Lesson one opened by watching a performance poet called Sarah Kaye performing her poem *B* (TED, 2011). This poem is about mother-daughter relationships and links to the themes of *Rooftoppers*, a story about a girl's adventure to Paris to find her mother. I was interested to see how the students would react to watching and working with a performance poem rather than being given a written text. This placed initial emphasis on engaging with the visual and auditory elements of the poem. Students were asked to make a note of performance techniques which they could in turn use in their own performances. Students were organised into carefully selected supportive groups of varying abilities and allocated one of the following poems: *Spellbound* by Emily Bronte, *Lightgatherer* by Carol Ann Duffy, *I carry your heart* by e e cummings and *City Streets* by Edna St. Vincent Millay. The poems were selected based on their connection to the class novel in terms of themes: love, cities and families. Students were given guidance on how to devise and rehearse their performance through class discussion and guidance sheets. The plenary was to decide on a title for the poem the groups had worked on individually.

The second lesson started with a card sort of poetry devices to familiarise the students with the language used to analyse poetry. Students had the opportunity to practise their performance for ten minutes. Students were given a grid to record their observations of other performances (see Appendix 1) which included key areas of analysis when looking at poetry: tone, rhyme, meaning and structure. Students were also asked to make connections between the poem and *Rooftoppers*.

The homework from this lesson was to write a written reflection (with a writing framework, see Appendix 2), which I could use as data.

The third lesson changed focus from performance to reading and writing poetry. Students were asked to use their five senses to describe a colour after being given an example from the *Black Book of Colour* (a book written to describe colour to people who are blind which includes braille, sensory description and images created in relief). The starter began their sensory description and building their ideas on imagery. Students then had an image from the poem they would be studying to write a description of. This was followed by a conversation about what imagery is and a definition compiled by several members of the class in collaboration. Next, students were given the title of the poem *Hope is the thing with feathers* by Emily Dickinson. Students were asked to make a link to the novel and identify which word class 'hope' belongs to. Conveniently the mother in the story of *Rooftoppers* is found on 'Rue De L'Espoire' in Paris which rather cemented the use of the word as well as the idea of the character's hope to be successful in her search for her mother. Students were given the poem and underlined any sensory description they identified. Discussion was moved on to the extended metaphor and abstract nouns. After students had drawn and annotated an image from the poem, they were given the task to write their own extended metaphors using Emily Dickinson's poem as a frame, following a copy-change model. Choosing an abstract noun and an animal to compare it to was modelled on the board and students created their own versions, with the support from their peers and the teaching support staff if they needed additional guidance or were stuck for creative ideas.

Methodology and research methods

I was conducting research similar to Moroney, Cliff Hodges, and Pullinger and Whitely, all mentioned in the literature review. As a practitioner I engaged in collecting research evidence through the teaching of the sequence of lessons outlined previously. The results not only informed my own practice but have the potential to add to the wider body of knowledge from similar studies. As a result of the research methods used in the literature which I reviewed, I came to the decision to generate data using a combination of questionnaires, interviews, observations, analysis of work produced in the lessons and memory tests. At the beginning of the sequence of lessons I informed students that this was part of a research project, which did not seek to measure their academic

attainment (so as not to cause alarm that they were being tested), and that it sought to explore different ways of teaching poetry and learning about a novel together.

I used multiple research methods to gain multiple sources of data, as my research was on such a small scale this would improve the validity of my findings: "the key to triangulation is to see the same thing from different perspectives and thus to be able to confirm or challenge the findings of one method with those of another" (Laws, Harper, Jones, & Marcus, 2013, p.143). I will be using a triangulation of research methods as outlined above in order to compare and contrast the ideas gathered from different sources and different observers.

Observation

During the first lesson, in which students devised and rehearsed their selected poems, the class teacher acted as an observer, recording her findings which I will draw on for my results alongside my own observations. A list of areas to observe (see Appendix 3) was provided for the teacher, with a focus on meaningful conversation analysing the poem. As noted by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011):

> "The distinctive feature of observation as a research process is that it offers an investigator the opportunity to gather 'live' data from naturally occurring social situations [...] The use of immediate awareness, or direct cognition, as a principal mode of research thus has the potential to yield more valid or authentic data than would otherwise be the case with mediated or inferential methods. And this is observation's unique strength."
>
> (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p.456)

The advantage of having the class teacher as observer during the devising and rehearsal lesson is that she knew the class well and the scheme of work I had planned; the observations would also be more reliable than mine as I was teaching the lesson and participating, reducing my impartiality. The disadvantage was that there could be some bias in the observation, as the teacher knew the aims of my research. The difficulty with observations as Cohen, Manion and Morrison note, is that "Even low inference observation, perhaps the safest form of observation, is itself highly selective, just as perception is selective" (p.474). The observation will focus on the conversations conducted by the students, when they are debating meaning and putting together their performances. I felt that as the students would be performing poetry, which can at times make students feel self-conscious, it would be best to have the class teacher in the room rather than a stranger who might inhibit the students' performance and confidence in discussion.

Memory test

After students had delivered their poetry performance and evaluated each other's work, I measured how many words they could remember from the poem in a minute. I repeated this test with the creative poetry writing poem to compare if performing the poem helped students to remember more of the poem. There were many points of difference between the poems they would be working on which would affect the results, but I believed it would be an interesting point of contrast. As I was working with such a small sample size, the results would not be conclusive but would provide me with some information about how well the students remembered the poems and this memory element is increasingly important at GCSE English, across the poems, plays and novels. My decision to use a memory test was directly influenced by Bessell and Riddell's (2016) research on *Embodiment and Performance* as previously explored in the literature review.

Questionnaire

The aim was to gather a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data from my questionnaire (initial, Questionnaire 1, and repeated at the end of the research sequence, Questionnaire 2) and I therefore selected a mixture of open and closed questions (see Appendix 4). Broadly, the aim of my questionnaire was to gauge students' attitudes to poetry. Thus I used a combination of simple open-ended questions and simple rating scales "which are presented as representing the attitude continuum underlying topics with instructions for the respondent to place ticks at the points on the scales which best indicate their attitudes toward the topics" (Foddy, 1994, p.153). The weakness of these measures as Foddy points out is that in a rating scale question "When respondents are asked to indicate whether they 'Strongly agree' — 'Strongly disagree', etc., with the item, the researcher can neither be sure that the same answers from different respondents have the same weights nor that similar answers to different items given by the same respondent carry equal weights" (p.162). However, based on the age of the students and the other options for gaining information from the questionnaire, I felt the Likert scale was most appropriate.

Interview

The interview was conducted with three students (Felicity, Megan and Emily, whose names have been changed to preserve anonymity) and as the study was conducted at an all girls' school I did not have to worry about the gender mix but sought students with a range of attainments for my sample,

I also selected interviewees based on students who had made particular comments about poetry performance or who especially engaged with the poetry writing. Students were selected in coordination with the class teacher to ensure there would not be any problems or conflicts. Three students were selected to keep the discussion a manageable size and based on Denscombe's guidance on interview groups, a small group allowed for conversation which "trades on group dynamics" and as a result "group discussions can be more illuminating" (Denscombe, 2014, p.217) as opposed to interviewing students individually.

Guide questions were prepared in advance of the interview to provide structure, but the questions were broad and open in order to allow for a variety of responses and flexibility to digress to wherever the conversation flowed; it also provided a more comfortable, informal environment for students to share their thoughts. As Denscombe points out in "semi structured interviews the interviewer still has a clear list of issues to be addressed […] the answers are open ended, and there is more emphasis on the interviewee elaborating points of interest" (Denscombe, 2014, p.215). To avoid students providing a response that they thought I wanted to hear, I phrased the questions to elicit their personal opinions rather than questions that could be perceived as having a correct response.

Analysis of students' work

The purpose of analysing students' work was to analyse their own reflections on the effectiveness of their performance, and what they felt they learned from the activity. The weakness of using students' work was that I had to read between the lines when interpreting the data about what their reflections suggest about their own learning from the two lessons (Denscombe, 2014; Taber, 2013). As is the case with the other research methods, it is possible that students may have misconstrued the guiding questions in the written reflections, or have written what they thought they should write, or may not have been able to communicate their feelings because of an "inability to effectively represent [their] thoughts into writing" (Taber, 2013, p.263).

Results and analysis

My results and analysis are presented in corresponding order to the research questions outlined earlier in this paper. A note at the beginning of the results: the quantitative data for my research is

problematic in several ways and therefore interpretation is tentative. There was an irregularity in students absent for lessons in which questionnaires were conducted and in some cases when responding to questions on the questionnaire, some students did not respond to every question.

What would students gain from writing their own poetry?

In the questionnaire I asked students if they considered themselves to be writers, to get a baseline judgement on students' opinions of themselves. This enabled me to ascertain if their opinions changed over the course of the poetry lessons and follow this up with interview questions.
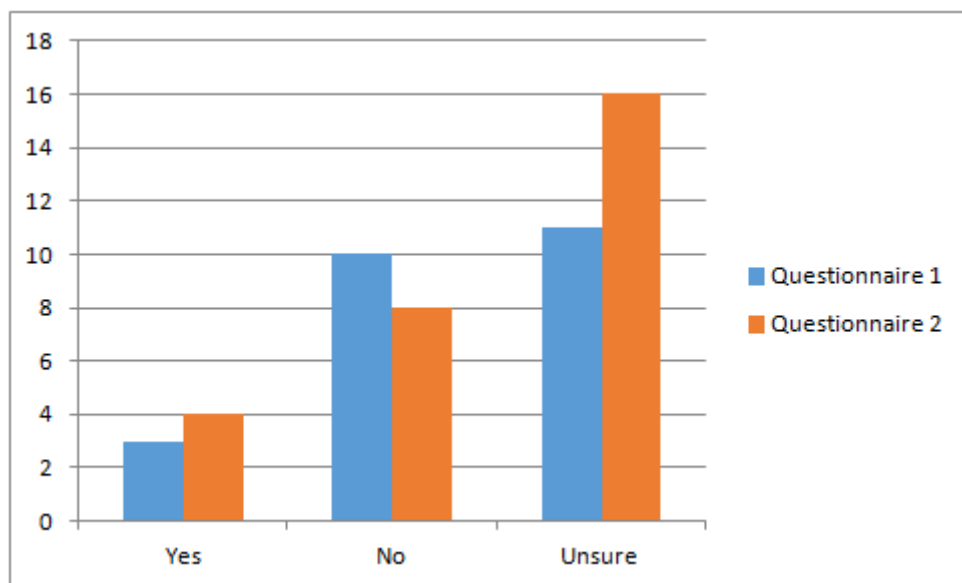
Figure 1: Initial and Post-research responses to Question 1 -
Do you consider yourself to be a writer?

The results of my questionnaires, as shown in Figure 1, show that with the exception of three students from the first questionnaire and four students from the second, the rest of the class did not or were unsure whether they considered themselves to be writers. These results are in no way conclusive and could in fact be the effect of four students being absent in the first lesson. However, the responses which I can take as a positive effect of the classes are two less students saying that they did not consider themselves to be a writer from the first questionnaire to the second. As a response to the interview question: What do you think you gain from writing your own poetry? the response from Felicity suggested to me that students write poetry in their own time: "I've never compared an abstract noun with an emotion before and I think it's something I might try and do

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again at home". I selected Megan to interview based on my observations of her in other English lessons, because she is someone who struggles with analysis and writing structured responses to questions. However, in the third lesson of the teaching sequence I had noticed that without being asked, she wrote a second extended metaphor and showed real pleasure in her work. For a student who is normally slightly disengaged and struggles during lessons, I was interested to talk to her further in the interview; as a very quiet student I was unable to draw much out of her as a response besides her comment that she "Really enjoyed writing poetry in the lesson" (with an enthusiastic smile and nodding of the head).

Insightfully, one student who had shown an enthusiasm for poetry made a connection to writing poetry and enhancing their writing overall, Emily commented: "This might sound silly but I think writing poetry helps with my normal writing because you have to be careful about the words you choose in poetry, and you have a rhythm and a flow in poetry that you can use in your normal sentences". This made a compelling argument which I had not previously thought of: the deliberate and measured choice of vocabulary required when writing poetry, to think creatively and rhythmically are all transferable skills which students can use when writing essays or prose to improve their conciseness, the flow of their writing and their ambitious choice of vocabulary. All of the above are qualities of good writing across subject areas. Therefore, from writing their own poetry, based on the interview responses, students were encouraged to have a love of learning and their subject, taking pleasure in their writing and suggesting they would do more of it at home. It also highlighted the benefit that poetry writing can transfer to other areas of student writing.

What is the value of performing poetry?

Part of my influence and enthusiasm for performance poetry had been sparked by the seminal poet T. S. Eliot's writing on the auditory imagination. Eliot states that poetry requires

> "the feeling for syllable and rhythm penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end."
> (Eliot, 1964, pp.162-163)

Two thirds of this unit of work were focused on performing poetry, therefore one of the key questions I sought to explore was the value of teaching poetry through performance. Is it just as useful as any other method of teaching poetry, or are certain elements of study clearer through this method? Based on my collection of students' work, myself and the class teacher's observations of

the students' conversations, the main value of performing poetry was to aid students' understanding of the tone, mood and meaning of the poem, in addition to hearing the rhythm and rhyme through performance. Students freely and eagerly discussed the mood of the poems, for example, Rachel observed that *Lightgatherer* by Duffy sounded much like a lullaby and this informed her group's performance, the soft tone and the singsong rhythm. I have found during my teaching that tone can sometimes be difficult for students to identify when analysing hard-copy poems but shifting the focus on to performing made students consider the way they would use their voice and how they would convey the poem for others to understand. As Cliff Hodges (2016) observes, through devising a performance, it "impels students to debate the poem's meanings and the ensuing dialogue is usually reflexive because participants make connections between the poetry and their wider knowledge of life in order to understand what each poem means" (377). The discussions observed by myself and the class teacher involved meaningful conversation about the tone and the meaning of the poem, in a way that is supported by peers rather than a direct question from the teacher, without an expectation that they are providing a correct or incorrect response, a key element of dialogic teaching as outlined by Robin Alexander (2008).

Students discussed the structure of the poem as an influence on how to divide up the poem between readers and how they should stand in their performance. Therefore, through the devising and rehearsing a performance of the poem, students engaged in meaningful, student-led conversation about meaning, structure, tone and imagery (students created trees and branches with their bodies to perform 'City Trees' to replicate the images from the poem in their movement). They were also able to easily observe on their own feedback sheets if they could detect a rhythm and rhyme from the performance. Although students could not answer all questions about their poem, they could discover amongst themselves the core elements of analysing a poem. To consolidate their understanding and interpretations, the plenary for the lesson was to come up with the title of the poem, thus involving more conversation about the core themes and messages in the poem. Their titles variously picked up on themes of love or identified vivid images from the poem.

What became clear to myself and the class teacher is that there is a limit to how much students will be able to interpret from the poem without any support. However, this year group were able through student-led conversation, to uncover the key elements of importance from the poems they were given to perform.
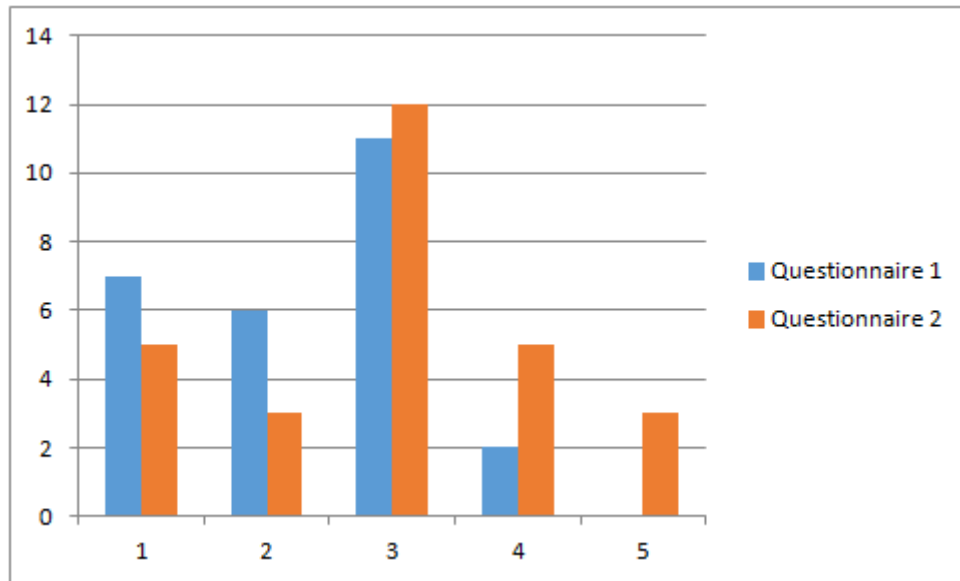
Figure 2: Initial and Post-research responses to Question 2 -

How helpful* is it to hear a poem read aloud?

The data in Figure 2 suggests that 24 of the 26 students from the first questionnaire appreciate the potential for, what Joy Alexander (2008) terms, "reading through the ear" and scored positively on how helpful it was to hear a poem read aloud. At the end of the three lessons the final questionnaire showed a drop in enthusiasm by two students for the usefulness of hearing poetry read aloud, while having to take into account that there were two more responses to this question overall. This is the opposite of what I had expected, although perhaps based on the initial positive feeling towards the usefulness, some students had then found it difficult to interpret the poem based solely on one performance from their peers.
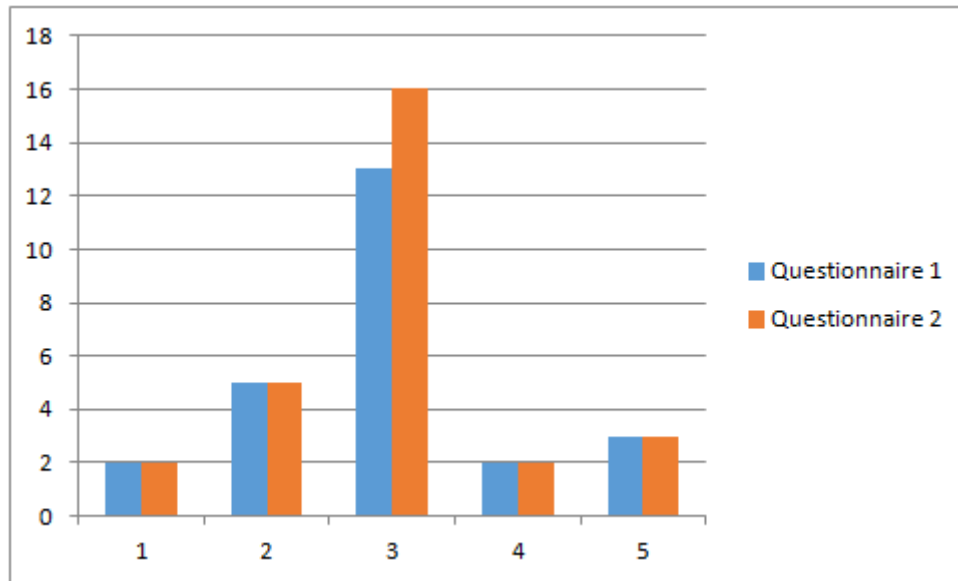
*1 - I find poems very difficult to understand, 5 - I find poems easy to understand

Figure 3: Initial and Post-research responses to Question 3 -

How far do you agree* with the following statement: I find poems hard to understand.

The responses collected from the questionnaire in response to the question 'How far do you agree with the following statement: I find poems hard to understand' shown in Figure 3, demonstrated a strong draw towards the centre for this question with 52% of students selecting a neutral 3 rating in Questionnaire 1 and 57% in Questionnaire 2. Some students had not responded to this question in the first questionnaire which accounts for the total increase in responses in Questionnaire 2, as well as some absent students in the first lesson. Based on the comments students were able to provide following the Likert scale question, there was a consensus in the comment that some poems are quite easy to understand but some they do not understand at all. Thus, most students were not prepared to say that they found all poetry really difficult to understand. The comments box which followed this question led to some illuminating observations of how students had experienced the poetry sequence. One student commented: "I find poems hard to understand" rating 3; "I feel like since we have done poetry I understand it more". This is only one qualitative piece of data which attests to the usefulness of a mini unit on poetry to enhance students' understanding; students did not generally increase their scale rating, but it is not possible to know due to the anonymous questionnaires, whether any students changed their score or if the two students who were absent for the first questionnaire merely rated that question at three. I therefore cannot suggest that students' confidence in understanding poetry has been increased through performing and writing their own poetry based on the response to this question; nonetheless, from the class observations, reviewing

the class work and through the interviews, I can gather that students built on existing poetry interpretation skills and successfully applied them to analysing a performed poem in a way that they generally found challenging but enjoyable.

Can students effectively make connections between a novel and a selection of poetry?

A number of the negative comments from the questionnaires came under the theme of not understanding or finding it hard to know the meaning of poems: "some poems are easy to understand but some are harder". This echoes a commonly held belief amongst students that there is a right and a wrong interpretation of a poem, and a correct or incorrect answer to the meaning of a poem. One of the most influential theories to have had an impact on the focus of close reading in the classroom is reader response theory which argues, as opposed to authorial intention being the only correct reading of a text, that meaning is made by the reader in a transaction between the reader, the text and the author. As Louise Rosenblatt (1978) explains in *The Reader, the Text and the Poem* the reader is "actively involved in building up a poem for himself out of his responses to the text," (p.10) meaning there is not one, singular, correct interpretation of a poem which students must learn. This is significant for the teaching of poetry in terms of analysis and allowing students to offer their own interpretations but it is also interesting for the purposes of making connections between reading and writing, and making connections across texts. During the lessons I had expressed that there was not a right or wrong connection to the novel (explaining that I myself had changed my mind or found multiple connections between the text and poems), thus encouraging students to view their own interpretations as equally valid as long as they could be justified, therefore ensuring that they were actively involved in creating their own meaning of the poems. Students were asked open-ended questions during the lesson about how they thought the poem might link with the text. Students competently made well-reasoned and justified connections which I acknowledged as all being valid. The observation notes from the class teacher showed that students enthusiastically engaged in making connections across texts when working in groups whilst devising their performance, noting that there was an "animated discussion about Matteo in the orphanage". Students showed enthusiasm and higher level thinking skills to interpret the themes and lexis of the poems and then make connections to the lexis and themes from their class novel.

Which classroom experiences might we devise to foster creative and personal poetic engagement in the English classroom?
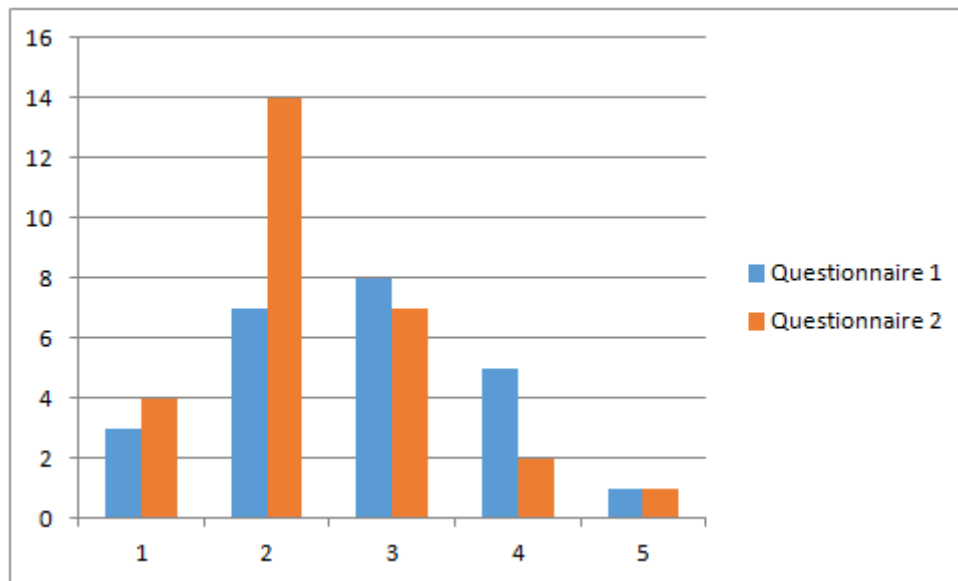
*1 - I really enjoy studying poetry, 5 - I really don't enjoy studying poetry

Figure 4: Initial and Post-research responses to Question 4 -
How much do you enjoy* studying poetry?

The data from my questionnaire, as presented in Figure 4, shows that students made a positive shift from the first questionnaire before the unit of work, with 42% responding positively (Likert scale 1 or 2) towards the positive end of the Likert scale by the time they completed the second questionnaire, with 64% responding positively. Interestingly, Lockwood and Proudfoot found that their participants had a 95% agreement in feeling more confident in dealing with unseen poetry in examinations. While I did not mention to my year 7 class that there is an unseen poetry element in the GCSE examination, I would suggest that my results broadly correlate with Lockwood and Proudfoot: after undergoing a unit of work on poetry students felt more positive about the study of poetry. Both our studies involved using a variety of means of studying poetry, through analysis, performance and writing poetry, showing that using a range of teaching techniques is effective in building confidence and enjoyment in the study of poetry for students. The girls' enjoyment increased which shows promise that when poetry is taught holistically within schemes of work, students can read and engage with poetry in a pleasurable way, effectively connecting poetry with prose texts. The following is a selection of the qualitative data collected from their questionnaires:

"I really enjoy poetry because I enjoy the creativity"; "I really enjoy poetry, it is so fun!"; "I quite like poetry, because each poem is unique and has different layers".

Primary school experience of poetry

As a result of the interviews and questionnaire results, a trend I observed in responses was how students' experience of poetry in primary school had a significant effect on their current feelings towards studying poetry. Emily, who had particularly enjoyed the performance poetry was able to give a detailed description of some very creative poetry teaching from her previous school which contributed to her present enthusiasm for poetry:

> *I really enjoyed poetry at junior school, it was really fun but we didn't get to do loads of it. We had a teacher who was really creative and she got us to do some performance poetry. And we got to write a free verse poem or sometimes we would act out poems. We did a project where we picked our favourite thing and went out and took photographs of them. So, like, mine was gymnastics and pigs, which is a bit strange and I didn't think it would really go together, but I was able to write a poem about pigs and gymnastics and put it all together in a display with my photographs…that was really fun.*

Conversely, students expressed on their questionnaire that they quite liked poetry but had not had much opportunity to work with poems at junior school, which contributed towards them not feeling confident in dealing with poetry, for example: "I kind of like it because I did not do too much poetry in my old school". Similarly, in interview Jennifer mentioned that she "really enjoyed poetry at junior school, it was really fun but we didn't get to do loads of it".

Which learning methods are most effective for the memorisation of poetry?

Memory test – performance vs copy-change writing

At the end of the first and last lesson, students were given one minute to write down as many words as they could remember from the poems they had been working on. The number of words memorised after the first lesson rehearsing and devising are represented in the first four columns under the author's name. The last column is the poem they re-wrote by Emily Dickinson.
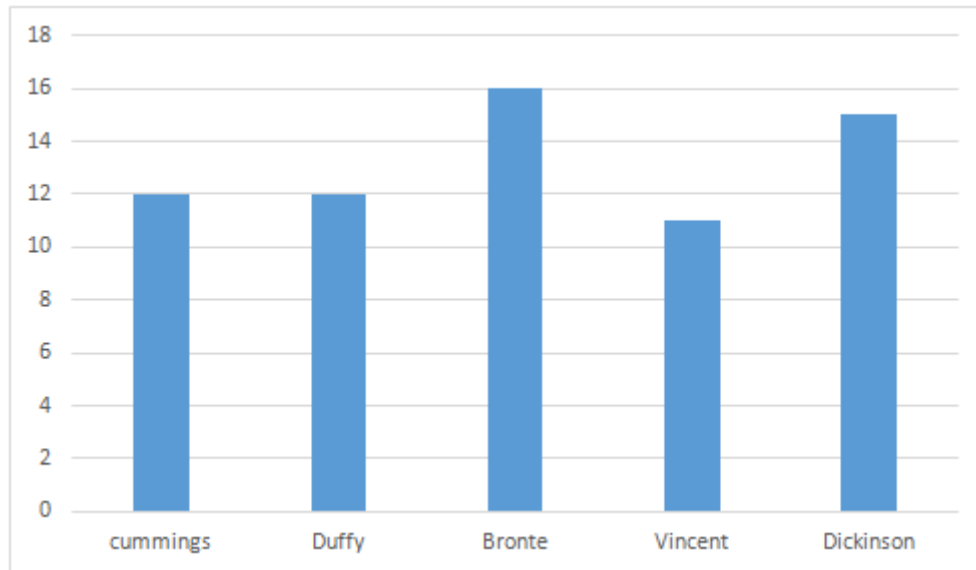
Figure 5: Number of words memorised for each poem

The results from the memory test differ from what I had anticipated based on the Bessell and Riddell research (2016). The aim had been to measure whether performing poetry helped students to remember the poem better, as opposed to studying a poem for analysis and re-writing. The results, as shown in Figure 5, showed that students were able to remember a high proportion of the poem they re-wrote *Hope is the thing with feathers*, I suspect in part because the structure and ideas are so simple and they focused on rewriting the first stanza towards the end of the lesson. But what struck me is that most students had copied down the whole of the first stanza for their memory test, having remembered it line for line, whereas in the memory test they had compiled fragments of lines and individual words. The performance poem which had the most words remembered from it was *Spellbound* by Bronte which has a very simple lexis and nursery rhyme type structure, aiding in memory recall. I had expected to see a difference in average number of words remembered according to ability, however, my higher-attaining group working on *Lightgatherer* by Duffy did not remember significantly more words, perhaps due to the complex syntax of the poem. Of course, there are a lot of variables between the poems which will affect students' ability to remember them but I feel that useful insights can be made from the average number of words remembered from the poems whilst accepting that there are flaws in the results. I do believe that in acknowledging different learning styles, performing poetry, for some learners, will aid their memorisation. My own research does not suggest that performance is the best means by which to memorise a poem; however, it is another means by which students can learn and potentially aid their memorisation.

Conclusion

Through the course of the study it was clear that through performance poetry, students could interpret and understand the tone of the poems and could effectively communicate this through performance. There was also evidence of productive and effective conversations surrounding the meaning of the poem, its structure and imagery within the poems.

Through the copy-change writing lesson (taking an original poem and using its structure and concept but changing the words to create your own meaning), students put into use their technical knowledge of language terms and techniques into their own writing. Writing their own poetry and focussing on word selection forced students to analyse individual words, which is a skill transferable to their everyday writing.

Many of the students had meaningful conversations about the link between the poems and the class novel they had been studying, with all groups able to make a legitimate, justified connection to the class text in relation to their individual poems. Studying the poems highlighted the themes of the novel and required students to interpret the text in a different way, consolidating their knowledge about the text and expanding their ideas on meaning.

Through performance poetry and copy-change poetry writing, students' creativity was fostered and students made personal poetic responses. These activities promoted students' love of learning and were both effective means by which students could analyse poetry through conversation, performance and their own creative writing.

I would not consider the results of my memorisation test to be conclusive but I would suggest that both the performance and the copy-change writing method of creating poetry were useful tools to use with students to aid their memorisation.

As a result of this study and my findings, I will certainly use these two methods of teaching poetry in the future, across all year groups. Performing poetry naturally prompts discussion on how to communicate the poem's tone and allows the students to hear the rhythm and musicality of a poem which reading silently from a page cannot facilitate. Referring back to Eliot's thoughts on the auditory imagination, I believe performance poetry to be one of the most effective means for students to feel the rhythm and musicality of the poem overall, as well as feeling each word

viscerally. As Eliot (1964) writes "the feeling for syllable and rhythm penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end" (pp.162-163). Both of these methods foster personal engagement with poetry and they both address the previously mentioned Ofsted observations that the "Weaknesses in the teaching of poetry include an emphasis on analytic approaches at the expense of creative ones" (2012, 44). Both of these approaches are creative and are effective in analysing key elements of a poem, as the observation sheets filled in by students following the performance poetry demonstrate. Students were able to expand and consolidate their learning of a novel through poetry, making connections to the novel, bringing their own interpretations to poems by connecting them with a class novel and promoting love of learning.

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Appendix 1

Worksheet for student analysis of performance poetry

	Does the poem have a regular rhythm and rhyme scheme?	What is the tone of the poem? For example: happy, sad, friendly, forbidding.	What is the structure of the poem? Is it one long verse or split into sections?	What is the poem about?	What about the poem stands out for you about the performance? A particular image or idea? The sound?
Group 1					
Group 2					

Appendix 2

Poetry performance reflection guidelines

What do you feel you have learnt about your poem through performing it? For example, did it help you to understand the tone, rhythm, meaning? Choose one or two examples.

What do you think made your performance particularly effective? Select one or two examples of what you chose to do to convey something in particular about the poem.

Would you do anything differently to improve your performance if you were going to do it again?

Appendix 3

Observation guidelines for class teacher observation

While devising their performances, have you observed any productive conversations about any of the following:

The structure of the poem (possibly in relation to the way students will stand and perform the piece).

The rhythm and rhyme scheme of the poem.

The meaning of the poem.

The way the poem might link to the text.

The tone of the poem.

Imagery in the poem.

Language analysis.

The e e cummings might prompt closer analysis of the punctuation. Any evidence of this?

Any other poetry analysis observed.

Any problems in understanding that you've observed from the performance and devising?

Appendix 4

Initial and post-research Questionnaires for students (Questionnaire 1 & 2)

1. Do you consider yourself to be a writer?

Yes   No   Unsure

2. How helpful is it on a scale of 1 – 5 to hear a poem read aloud (1= really helpful, 5=not at all helpful) _____

3. How far do you agree with the following statement: 'I find poems hard to understand'.

(1= I find poetry easy to understand, 5= I find poetry really difficult to understand)

_____

Can you make a brief comment explaining why?

_____

_____

4. How much do you enjoy studying poetry (1= I really enjoy poetry, 5= I really dislike poetry) _____

Can you make a brief comment explaining why?

_____

_____