

# What If We Taught Teachers to Think More Like Poets?

Jane Speare  
School of Education

In 2007 new professional standards were introduced for teachers, trainers and tutors working in the lifelong learning sector. These defined key purposes and standards of teacher education, listing the values, skills and ultimately content that drives training programmes in England and Wales. These are important prescriptions influencing profoundly the way we introduce our profession to the next generation of teachers, yet so often I, my colleagues and our trainees groan at the 'dead-hand language' in which our professionalism is couched. We are urged to think about 'delivery' of learning, to use 'instruments of assessment' to employ the 'tools' of feedback and of course 'produce' information which verifies these activities are checked within 'quality cycles and processes'. I'm not arguing here against the need for standards in training, but when I read this kind of stuff I am hard pushed not to visualise some kind of virtual, grey warehouse churning out teachers inured to the alien language of standards and resigned to the idea that learning and teaching have become 'the love that dare not speak its name'.

In my experience the ambitions of trainees start elsewhere. Many wannabe teachers at interview tell me they want to teach imaginatively; to make a difference to the lives of jaded teenagers and to enthuse their learners with ideas and skills from their subject area. So here's a 'transferable skill challenge' to chew on: what if we taught our trainee teachers to think less like factory supervisors and more like poets? What could a beginner teacher of brick-laying or physics possibly learn from the dark arts of the sonnet, the haiku or the joys of blank verse?

## The importance of sound

As teacher trainers we rightly tell our trainees to learn to shut up a bit. To focus on learners, curb the urge to tell people things and start to organise learning so learners find out for themselves. Like it or not though, nearly every teacher spends some time speaking to groups and a conscious use of tone, rhythm and emphasis can make the difference between switched on and switched off students. From Jamaican dub poets like Linton Kwesi-Johnson to the wry Essex tones of Luke Wright, performance poets know how to use the music inherent in language to keep people interested in and focused on the bigger picture. The Internet offers many examples we could use as inspiration for our teachers to consider: try the Oxfam Poetry Readings available through YouTube as a starter.

## Imagery

It's a truism to say we live in a culture dominated by images and many proponents of the theories of so-called 'learning styles' argue that a majority of students in colleges and schools prefer learning through visual means. Poetry tends to be a visual art form and this is certainly the case for 'page



poets' whose work is best appreciated read on the page. Poets are a fastidious lot and pay serious attention to layout, font size and line breaks as these features signal and reinforce meaning in their work. Beginner teachers making their first worksheets or PowerPoint presentations might find it helpful to reflect how different poets use page and space to gain and hold a reader's attention. The most precise example of this is perhaps the 'concrete' poets from the 1950s in whose work the arrangement of words is as important as the words themselves in conveying meaning. Plenty of images of these are freely available on the net.

## **The use of figurative language**

Describing something by comparing it with another is a necessity in teaching. We do it all the time, for example to build on what our learners know, reinforce ideas or provide 'memory hooks' for future learning. Teachers also instinctively appreciate that to become absorbed students usually need some kind of emotional engagement with what they are learning. Poetry specialises in this. Through the use of metaphor, simile and hyperbole poets work hard to arouse the senses and fuse feeling with thought. There are many famous examples of this: who doesn't remember Burn's rendering of love as like "a red red rose/that's newly sprung in June"? (See by way of contrast the present laureate Carol Ann Duffy's image in the poem Valentine where she envisages love as a many layered onion). It matters that we encourage our trainees to be adventurous and thoughtful about the words they use because if we don't there is a risk they will default to the current dominant language of instruction: 'here are the outcomes I will deliver and here are the competencies students will produce .... zzzzz'.

## **Playful leaps**

Poetry, (particularly the 'deep image' poetry of people like Robert Bly) is notorious for going 'off message' and making fanciful leaps of imagination. Perhaps this feature is one of those things that lead to poetry's reputation as difficult or inaccessible, but I would argue this is also one of its most distinctive features which we might appreciate in relation to teaching. Poems simply don't have to follow logic in the same way that journalism, text books or essays do – and neither do humans. This isn't to undermine the importance of rigorous logic and careful use of evidence. These are obviously vital aspects of our intellectual lives but they don't come near the sum total of our human capabilities. As Graham Swift puts it in his 1983 novel *Waterland* "humans are the story telling animals ..." and for me that means we thrive on more than a unidirectional narrative. All teachers – whether beginners or experienced – need the confidence to go beyond tamely following plans, to take risks and follow the initiative of students as they make sense of what they are learning. Learning programmes may be presented in unit form but that doesn't mean we learn that way and poetry can be a reminder of this.

## **Concision**

In poems people say as much as they can through use of the fewest, most well chosen words. Verbosity is not a quality to develop in teachers.

Enough said.