



## TEACHING POETRY THROUGH LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH: A PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE

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### ABSTRACT :

*The paper firstly provides a brief outline of some of the key issues involved in poetry teaching and thereafter explains the characteristics of various approaches in the teaching of poetry and their implementation in undergraduate colleges. It furthermore also proceeds to explain the learner-centred approach involved in equipping teachers to implement this approach in their classes, examines the degree of success attained by such teachers in implementing this approach in the actual classroom situation and provides an overview of the students' feedback relating to the learner-centred approaches that characterized English methodology sessions.*



**KEYWORDS :** *Practical Experience, Through Learner-Centred*

### INTRODUCTION

Teaching literature is a way of making people better human beings and better citizens, and for achieving this broader aim, one must learn to read, enjoy and appreciate pieces of literature. To facilitate students in this, they are to be helped to develop certain competencies and skills. Poetry can be one of the most difficult types of literature to bring to life for learners in an undergraduate college. However, if the teacher presents the poem in a lively manner and uses learner-centred approach to unravel the meaning of the poem, he/she will instill in his/her learners not only an increased awareness and understanding of the range of English-speaking cultures across the globe, but will also enable him/ her to gain immense sensual, emotional and intellectual pleasure from the learning experience. The topics that poems address are in themselves interesting and important since they focus on a range of issues that affect society at large. As with the teaching of other types and levels of reading, the aims of teaching poetry should include learner interaction with the text, learner enjoyment and appreciation. Poetry teaching needs to encourage learners to consider, examine and analyse the ideas and themes presented in a poem and the style of language and devices used to convey the message for the purposes of critical commentary. If poetry lessons are to be meaningful it is thus imperative for learners to understand what the poet is saying and how he is saying it.

### POETRY TEACHING

The success of poetry lessons is dependent on the teacher's level of creativity and enthusiasm allied to the teaching approaches that he/she implements to generate the learner's interest in poetry. Some of the challenges which arise when teaching poetry are that learners may either be unable to

understand the language in which the poem is couched or may have difficulty in identifying with the subject matter of the poem. The teacher may furthermore also lack the skills of presenting interesting and successful poetry lessons or may be uncertain how to present poetry to his learners so that it can be enjoyed, understood and appreciated as an important component of literature teaching. In their teaching of poetry teachers need to realize that it is far more important for their learners to understand the overall meaning of the poem than to be able to only explain individual words and discrete references. However, essential vocabulary which is crucial to an understanding of the poem as a whole must be discussed. Explanations should be clear, lucid and easy to follow. Pedantry, long winding and confusing explanations will lead to boredom and may result in learners misunderstanding the crux of the poem. Teachers should aim to teach easier poems first and gradually increase the level of difficulty. In order to stimulate learners' interest in poetry and to assist them to identify with the subject matter, it is imperative that teachers select poems that are interesting, relevant to the learners' lives and appropriate to their maturation level. According to Davison and Dowson (1998) in this regard it is imperative for teachers when planning poetry lessons to establish what learners enjoy, know and have studied in order to build on their achievements and offer a sense of continuity. The focus on learners' prior knowledge is thus of paramount importance if the teacher hopes to engage them meaningfully in poetry lessons and ensure that they are stimulated as a result of the experience. This viewpoint is supported by Hayworth, Turner and Whiteley (2004:78) who contend that what learners bring to the poetry lesson in terms of language, existing understandings, cultural insights and experiences should be acknowledged and valued as this is regarded as good practice in the teaching of poetry.

In consideration of an appropriate method to use as a vehicle for the presentation of the poem and to stimulate the learners' interest, learners should be afforded opportunities to examine poems for themselves; both in deciphering the meaning and presenting it imaginatively. A study of poetry should also serve to motivate learners to write poetry as a means of self expression and as a way of tapping into their creative potential. It is imperative that learners are made aware of the fact that poetry is not only British and classical, but also modern and universal. The main approaches to teaching of poetry may be classified as subject-centred, teacher-centred and student-centred / learner-centred approach. Subject-centred approach is sometimes called 'transmission' theory of teaching and is primarily about transferring knowledge such as views of eminent critics on the work from the teacher to the note-book of the students without giving them competence either in language or literature. This transmission mode has continued as it is easier to pass on information than to inculcate skills.

## APPROACHES IN THE TEACHING OF POETRY

### Teacher-Centred Approach

Teachers may adopt a variety of approaches in the teaching of poetry in their classes. While some teachers may favour a more teacher dominated approach characterised by the lecture/ narrative method, others may adopt a more communicative approach characterised by group work and problem based inquiry. The approach which a teacher adopts is dictated by his/ her philosophy of teaching. This method places the teacher at the centre of learning and is underpinned by the philosophy that the learners are there to listen and the teacher is there to provide the learners with a correct interpretation of the poem as he/ she has the relevant knowledge, skills and experience to teach the content. This type of lesson is largely characterised by teacher talk and learner passivity. The teacher proceeds to unravel the meaning of the poem in a linear fashion with a line by line analysis and the delivery of a lesson characterised by an absence of class discussion, questioning or opportunities for oral feedback from learners. The steps involved in the narrative/ lecture method are as follows:

1. Teacher greets the class and asks the learners to turn to the relevant page in their text books.
2. Teacher proceeds to analyse the poem in a linear fashion by explaining the meaning of words, figures of speech, the theme and other related issues pertaining to the poem, whilst learners listen attentively and make notes during the lesson.
3. The teacher provides learners with a series of contextual questions based on the poem which learners have to answer independently in their literature books.

An analysis of this approach vividly illustrates that the learner is denied of a voice in the teaching/ learning situation as he/she is expected to accept the teacher's one-sided interpretation as the only correct version which ultimately inhibits him from thinking for himself and drawing his own conclusions on the basis of his interpretation. This approach effectively reduces the learner to a passive recipient and denies him an opportunity to express his/her views on the poem in a constructive and meaningful manner. There is in effect an absence of a dialectical/ dialogical engagement between the teacher and the learner in the learning process which militates against the philosophy that learners come to a class with prior knowledge which teachers should use to their advantage during the teaching/ learning process. Since the learners are relegated to passive recipients they will find the lessons dull and boring which could result in them adopting disruptive behaviour. Teacher-centred approach focuses on what the teacher must do or be in order to facilitate learning. Here the business of teaching is dominated by lectures and the cruder forms of the teacher's authority are still rampant. Features like inadequate discussion and questioning and imposition of opinions by the teacher are still prevalent.

### LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH

In contrast to the narrative approach which is more teacher-centred, there are other approaches, amongst others, the group and problem solving approaches which provide learners with meaningful opportunities to be active participants since they place the learner at the centre of learning and take cognizance of their unique experiences, backgrounds and prior knowledge. Learner-centred approach focuses on the way people learn and the organization of classroom process to maximize active learning and gradually leads to self-learning. This approach is extremely relevant in the context of poetry teaching as poetry is a distinct genre of literature. More so at the undergraduate level the students are at a not so advanced stage of exposure to literature. It is at the adolescent stage that interest in poetry needs to be developed. The demand is to alert their senses, stimulate their imagination and enrich their emotional and intellectual experiences. This approach helps the teachers to cope quite effectively with large classes which today are one of the main problems of teaching especially at undergraduate level. In developing the student's ability to progress in reading poems on his own, a careful selection and gradation of the texts to be studied, helps a lot. What is offered to the students must not only suit their linguistic capacity but be within the range of their general experience as it is the possibility of securing a response that matters. In the early stages, good and simple poems may be an encouragement to further progress. But what is too difficult will only set up distaste for poetry and will fail to establish a reading habit which is essential for self-learning and should be the teacher's constant aim. We should also think of grading the poems properly in terms of suiting the literary demands that are made of students to their stage of development.

### GROUP APPROACH

The group approach to poetry teaching aims to enable learners to share ideas with other members of a group so that they are able to develop critical and creative skills and arrive at an interpretation of the poem based on shared consensus and the acquisition of new insights and viewpoints. This view is shared by Sterling, Riley and Ford (1999:33) who contend that through group work, learners are presented with opportunities to develop good social skills which enable them to become self-reliant, independent and self-directed. There are variations to the group approach, but below are the possible steps that could be followed with the implementation of this approach during the teaching of poetry:

1. The poem is initially read aloud in a clear, sensitive and convincing manner by the teacher.
2. The learners are divided into groups of five or six and select one of the members, to read the poem out loud to the group a second time.
3. The group selects a secretary/scribe who records the main points and a presenter who will report back to the class.

4. The groups discuss the meaning of the poem and any problems that arise from it, with the teacher as facilitator.
5. The class re-assembles and each presenter reports on his/her group's interpretation of the poem.
6. The teacher facilitates a class discussion on the meaning of the poem and highlights some issues that they may have overlooked during their group work sessions.
7. The teacher asks the class if they enjoyed the poem, if it is relevant to their own experiences and whether anything similar has happened to them.
8. The learners respond to a written exercise based on the poem.
9. In a follow-up lesson the class can present the poem imaginatively; either by acting it in groups, setting it to music or using it as part of a theme.

The group approach affords learners the opportunity to think for themselves and to arrive at their own interpretations based on discussion. In this regard according to Jackson, Soskin and Verster (1996) teachers should allow learners to examine poems for themselves and draw their own conclusions without the teacher's interference so that they can be actively engaged in the learning process. The skills of negotiation and team work which they will ultimately acquire during the process will contribute to their overall development and enable them to function effectively in society and in the world of work when they are employed after their studies. They need to realise that since their insights and viewpoints are valued, they must not feel alienated from the learning process. According to Sterling, Riley and Ford (1999), when learners work in a group they usually become more motivated as they are participating more fully in their own learning and since they feel safer with their peers they develop better problem-solving skills. This approach contrasts markedly with the narrative approach since, while it affords learners the opportunity to think for themselves and to share ideas, the narrative approach stifles creativity, originality and team work. Jackson, Soskin and Verster (1996) in their evaluation of the importance of group work in poetry lessons, contend that pair and group work create a more relaxed, anxiety-free environment in the classroom since learners feel more confident and relaxed when they speak to their peers.

### PROBLEM SOLVING APPROACH TO POETRY

The problem solving strategy is also a learner-centred approach which affords learners opportunities to respond to a series of questions based on the poem in their groups by sharing ideas and reaching consensus in the formulation and articulation of their responses. The following steps could be followed in the implementation of a poetry lesson adopting a problem solving approach:

1. Teacher activates schemata by discussing theme relating to the poem.
2. Learners discuss the theme in their groups and provide feedback.
3. Learners complete worksheet of questions based on the poem in groups
4. Groups provide responses to questions to the rest of the class with teacher facilitation.
5. Teacher provides a summary of the main ideas.
6. Individual follows up exercise for homework.

The success of the problem solving approach requires thorough planning on the part of teachers as they have to give careful thought to the questions which they expect the learners to respond to in their groups. Questions, whether organised in a worksheet or used directly in oral whole-class discussion must be carefully focused, graded and organised. The aim of these questions is not merely to obtain answers (in fact, answers should sometimes not be expected) but to provide learners with practice in using an analytical framework, until they can eventually use it independently. In sequence you should aim to present learners with questions from these seven categories:

- a) **Fact questions:** These can be answered by direct reference to the poem.
- b) **Inference questions:** These require the learner to make connections based on the factual details of the poem, but not stated explicitly. These are vital questions because they lead the learners towards the subject matter of the poem.

- c) **Technique questions:** These enable the learner to identify an important technique and to relate it to the factual details and the inferences already uncovered. He/ she needs to perceive the relationship of technique to theme.
- d) **Generalisation questions:** These make use of the specific facts, inferences and techniques already perceived in order to come to a general conclusion which would in effect be a statement of theme.
- e) **Extension questions:** These lead the learner to relate his experience and understanding of the poem to his own life experience. Conversely, of course, seeing the links between the poem and his life experiences also enriches his understanding of the poem.
- f) **Response questions:** Here the learner is encouraged to refine his/her understanding of the poem by returning to it to discover the link between his imaginative understanding and the techniques and details used in the poem.

Now let us consider very briefly the place of testing in learnercentred approach where experience and knowledge that the students bring with them when they read poetry counts a lot and where just one particular interpretation is not favourable. If there is no scope for varied interpretations, the students just listen carefully in class and they do well in the examination without reading the text closely. When there is no personal connection between the poem and the reader, the students do not have to understand or apply what they read. With such an arrangement, we cannot convince the students that reading poetry is a pleasurable activity, one to be enjoyed life long. Tests and examinations should be so designed that they cover a wide range of the prescribed poems as well as objectives of poetry teaching through the use of a variety of question forms that probe deeper understanding and appreciation. Now let us come back to poetry teaching which the main theme of this paper is.

Poetry as a distinct genre of literature has its own characteristics like emotional content, ideas or an evaluation of human experiences, appeal to the senses, imagery, rhythm, artistic form (Bateson: 190). Thus poetry being the most complex of the literary arts, it is not surprising that there are innumerable ways of teaching it. Each teacher by his study and experience will find the best approach suitable to the size, maturity and background of his classes. One such technique is to provide opportunities for the students to compare and contrast. One of the most effective ways to show them how poetic language works is to have them compare a poem with a prose statement of the same theme. Wordsworth's *'The Solitary Reaper'* based on a real incident is a good poem to use for this purpose. Once Wordsworth, his sister Dorothy and Coleridge visited Scotland. Dorothy wrote: 'It was harvest time and the fields were quietly-might I say pensively? enlivened by small companies of reapers. It is not uncommon in the more lonely parts of the Highlands to see a single person so employed'. *'The Solitary Reaper'* was suggested to William by a beautiful sentence in Thomas Wilkinson's *'Tour of Scotland'*: 'Passed a woman who was reaping alone; she sung in Erse as she bended over her sickle; the sweetest human voice I ever heard; her strains were tenderly melancholy: and felt delicious, long after they were heard no more.' By the mysterious alchemy of a poet's art Wordsworth transmuted into a beautiful poem what he saw, heard and read. Through intelligent questioning the teacher can attempt to let the students see how the poet brought about this change. From a comparative study of poetry the students may be encouraged to obtain on their own a valuable insight that a work of art is not to be judged by its subject matter only but also by its treatment. This principle may be illustrated by a discussion of four poems dealing with railroad and by a prose comment on it - Emily Dickinson's *'I like to See it Lap the Miles'* (lyric), Whitman's *'To a Locomotive in Winter'* (free verse), Stephen Spender's *'The Express'* (blank verse) and Theodore Reothkhe's *'Night Journey'* (clipped trimeter lines). Another type of poetic contrast that may be fruitful for the students to explore on their own is the simple and complex treatment of the same theme. Wordsworth's *'We are Seven'* and John Crowe Ransom's *'Janet Waking'* deal with the incomprehensibility of the concept of death to a vivacious child. Both poems are set in a narrative framework. But the resemblance ends here. Some carefully designed questions might elicit some of the differences: 'How would you contrast the two adults? The two children? Is there any shift in the tone of Wordsworth's poem? Is there any shift in diction? Which poem communicates a more complex experience?' The teacher might also bring out how a poet revises a first or spontaneous inspiration that

he had. For example, Wordsworth improved *'The Solitary Reaper'* immeasurably by changing two lines. In the first version he wrote-

'A sweeter voice ne'er was heard.'  
This he revised to read-  
'A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard.'  
And the original line-  
'I listened till I had my fill.'  
was changed to-  
'I listened motionless and still.'

The students may be asked to notice the changes made and the possible reasons for doing so, as also the impact due to these changes. They may be led to notice the difference between Wordsworth's two versions and how the second version has become more refined:

She dwelt among the untrodden ways  
Besides the springs of Dove,  
A maid whom there were none to praise  
And very few to love.  
A maid whom there were none to praise  
And very few to love  
Dwelt among the untrodden ways  
Besides the springs of Dove.

With the help of suitable questions and discussion, the students might contrast several poems about the same person. For this purpose Carl Sandburg's tribute *'To the Ghost of John Milton'* and two other poems may be considered: Wordsworth's sonnet *'London 1802'* (Milton, *Thou Shouldst be Living at This Hour*) and Tennyson's *'Milton.'*

Another device to make poetry interesting, particularly at the undergraduate stage, is asking the students to recite simpler and short poems in the proper manner by taking care of stress/intonation, rhythm, pauses and such other relevant prosodic features. This might make the study of poetry more rewarding and also give them an opportunity to focus on their own on poetic features like rhyme and assonance, alliteration and rhythm and the process might gradually lead to better understanding and interpretation of the poem. It gives them a great sense of the current of thought. Recitation of the poem by the students is to be preceded by its reading aloud by the teacher effectively, enthusiastically and with understanding (Brumfit & Carter: 20). The teacher makes up his mind on an interpretation and helps the students to live in the poem by the persuasiveness and eloquence of his reading. He fortifies his reading with facial expressions and gestures, if needed. Followed by such preparation, the students might be encouraged and helped to recite in a proper manner. The students might be required to assemble a personal anthology in which they record their own favourite lines and verses with an introduction that explains their principles of selection. They may also illustrate them with sketches of their own. This anthology can be organized topically- art, beauty, death, despair, gifts, God, heart, honour, love, nature, night etc. At the end of a course one topic out of these may be selected for writing a short essay or paper. The Web may also be used for this purpose as it is an easy way for browsing, cutting and pasting at a Website. The material can be reworked by arranging and juxtaposing, throwing in significant visual material, giving new titles to the poems etc. Preparing a personal anthology in this way will help the students in going deeper into the poems on their own. Another activity that provides a good opportunity for self learning is the keeping of a portfolio of their writing about the poems they study. This may help them to first notice and then explore poetic language. To begin with they may explore a few words that seem to have a special role in the poem. They go on making their short comments on the poems they study and also add views of others. By the end of the year they might have a good collection which can be used for writing longer paragraphs and short essays. An effective implementation of learner-centred approach depends to a great extent on the proper use of questions (Showalter: 31). Before the students read the poem, it is generally helpful to ask a series of questions to create the right mental attitude for receptivity. The level and type of questions can be varied according

to the level of the language proficiency of the learner group but the questions should be presented with a degree of informality. After reading the poem aloud the teacher asks a few questions to probe the students' reaction to the poem as a whole, to establish its tone (cheerful, sad etc.). If some essentials are missed, the teacher can lead to them. Through questions the students are led to discover the patterns of words, images, sounds etc. Questions are formulated to assist them towards a simple evaluation of the reason for a particular combination of words and an appreciation of their special quality. Questions that make them go again and again to the text are asked, e.g.:

- 1) In which line(s) does the poet try to say.....
- 2) Which words in the poem tell you that the poet is trying to say.....

It is to be noted here that in such questions the teacher puts into his own words the 'idea' that he thinks the lines convey. Questions like the ones given below may also be asked:

(a) Visual:

What are the colours of (i) snow (ii) evening (iii) weeds?

(b) Auditory:

What sounds are mentioned in the poem?

(c) Tactile:

What would be the tactile impression of (i) frozen lake (ii) downy flake (iii) woods

(d) Try to analyze the emotional expression of the poem.

(Robert Frost's: Stopping by the Woods.....)

In learner-centred approach, pointed questions and directions turn into discussion that leads to interaction in place of conventional lectures. Discussion is not so much a way of learning to read a poem as something which analyses an experience already achieved, at least in part. What is most important to the reader is the enjoyment he gets by interacting with the text. The teacher's job is to help him to discover the experience for himself as nothing destroys the experience in the poem so effectively as too much explanation. It is also to be remembered here that the way poems are read and discussed must differ widely to be true to the individual characteristics of the poems themselves.

Devices like the use of material aids such as diagrams, sketches, charts and pictures, role play and puppetry might be employed to lead the students towards learning at their own level (Sood: 45). Strategies like student-led seminars, (led initially by a group of students but later by individuals) various types of projects for individuals or with small groups of students working with the tutor and one to one discussions with the students might pave the way towards self-learning.

In brief, teachers of poetry should combine variations of different approaches and apply them in relation to conditions obtaining in their classrooms. Their task is not to hand over predigested meanings but to teach the students how to read and interpret for themselves, not to indoctrinate them with an academically hall-marked and guaranteed set of received opinions but help them to be reasonably skilled and sensitive readers, able to feel and judge for themselves, with fidelity to the textual facts, in response to any work of literature they may choose to read.

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