CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN POETRY: IDENTITY

This resource has been developed for teachers of year 10 English according to the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) guidelines. The resource uses poetry to explore how identity is expressed in a culturally diverse contemporary Australia, with particular focus on the exciting and innovative ways that Australian poets are using poetic form. The resource is specifically linked to VCELT463 and VCELA483, and can be used to address each of the three interconnected English strands and three cross-curricular priorities identified by the national curriculum.

To situate this resource within the context of a collaborative learning task, and to contextualise it for other users, this paper has been divided as follows:

- Contextualising the resource: curriculum links
- Literature review
- Notes on collaboration

The unit plan and lessons developed as part of this resource use Teach for Australia (TFA) templates, prepared in conjunction with the lesson planning guidelines provided as a resource for Deakin University’s ‘English Education A’ (ECL761) course.

The resource can be accessed at this link:

https://contemporaryaustralianpoetryresource.wordpress.com/

Contextualising the resource: curriculum links

This resource developed out of the group’s desire to create a unit of work that we could each use in our future teaching. Poetry is often considered difficult to teach, and we felt that as emerging English teachers it was pertinent to demystify the genre, both for ourselves and for other members of our cohort. We were also conscious of the need to create a resource that will be engaging for students across the vastly different school environments that we will be placed in for the next two years: Ararat College in Ararat; Grovedale College outside Geelong; and Parkville College within the Melbourne Youth Justice Centre. We felt that a focus on identity would allow a range of students from different backgrounds to find entry points into our lessons, as the need to develop a sense of self is a crucial aspect of the life and wellbeing of teenagers across intersections of gender, geography, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic-status.
This resource is based around the VCAA curriculum sub-strands VCELT463 and VCELA483 as outlined below:

**VCELT463** Identify, explain and discuss how narrative viewpoint, structure, characterisation and devices including analogy and satire shape different interpretations and responses to a text.

**ELABORATIONS:**
- Looking at a range of short poems, a short story, or extracts from a novel or film to find and discuss examples of how language devices layer meaning and influence the responses of listeners, viewers or readers

**VCELA483:** Understand how language use can have inclusive and exclusive social effects, and can empower or disempower people

**ELABORATIONS:**
- Identifying language that seeks to align the listener or reader (for example 'of course', 'obviously', 'as you can imagine')
- Identifying the use of first person (I, we) and second person pronouns (you) to distance or involve the audience, for example in a speech made to a local cultural community
- Identifying references to shared assumptions
- Identifying appeals to shared cultural knowledge, values and beliefs
- Reflecting on experiences of when language includes, distances or marginalises others
- Creating texts that represent personal belief systems (such as credos, statements of ethical judgements, guidelines, letters to the editor and blog entries).

Given the complex thinking and self-knowledge required of this unit, and in consultation with the curriculum documents, we decided to aim this resource at year 10 students, with focus on the curriculum strands VCELT463 and VCELA483. VCELT463 introduces poetic language and language structures, with elaborations directly linked to the study of poetry. We felt that VCELA483 worked well in conjunction with this focus on language as it promotes engagement and questioning of the power structures inherent in language. Its elaborations provide broad scope for an analysis of personal and cultural identity.

The decision to focus on the broad category of ‘contemporary Australian poetry’ was also made to promote student engagement as the enormous variety of forms – from slam poetry to concrete poems and from rap to more traditional modes like sonnets – allows teachers to find a style that will appeal to a range of students. In designing some of our lessons we have created activities that can be applied to a range of different poets and created a list of poets who work in a range of styles as part of our resource.
As a group we wanted to create a resource that enabled us to fully engage with the English curriculum, and we came to the conclusion that poetry – with its multifarious forms and themes – would give us the opportunity to explore the interconnected stands of ‘Language’, ‘Literature’, and ‘Literacy’ and some of their related sub-strands. Similarly, the resource will allow teachers to engage with the three cross-curricular priorities of ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures’, ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’ and ‘Sustainability’. For example: using the lesson template for identity in association with the poet Samuel Wagan Watson, a class could look at indigenous culture in contemporary urban environments; in this resource the lesson using the literary devices template to explore sensory language examines how Eileen Chong employs the senses to portray her own experience of migration from Singapore to Australia; and the ‘Australian poetry and the environment’ lesson looks at the ways in which portrayals of the Australian environment have changed over time, and could explore the reasons for this.

Finally, the group was concerned that the resource be a dynamic and accessible tool that could be shared with other members of our cohort and updated as we continue our teaching journey. We therefore decided to create a website using the free blogging platform Wordpress that can be made available publicly or restricted as required. The site is a central storage point for our unit and lesson plans, a repository for our research into contemporary Australian poets, and a space to save a variety of useful links and resources as we come across them.

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**Literature review**

Apprehension around the teaching of poetry in the secondary classroom is well documented. As Louise Wakeling acknowledges, despite its central role in some of the most significant events in our lives – weddings, funerals – poetry is often seen as ‘opaque, subjective, lacking transparency, even just plain boring.’ (2009, p.114) In a 2014 issue of the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) journal *Idiom* focused on poetry, Susanne Gannon reflects on the lack of critical engagement around the teaching of poetry in the Australian education system. Gannon underlines the surprising disconnect between what is a vibrant, even flourishing art form in Australia, pointing particularly to the recent explosion in the slam poetry scene, and the understanding of poetry in a school context as ‘difficult, remote and arcane’ (2014, paragraph 7) held by students and teachers alike.

Sue Dymoke’s 2001 report ‘Taking poetry off its pedestal: the place of poetry writing in an assessment-driven curriculum’ goes some way towards explaining the anxiety educators feel around teaching poetry. Over two years, Dymoke studied the poetry teaching methods of a group of teachers in a range of schools. Her findings pointed to a lack of confidence around the assessment of students’ poetry. Many teachers felt that the personal and subjective nature of poetic work prohibited them from marking it: ‘...if poetry is creative and individual who am I to assess it?’ (Dymoke, 2001, p.34) It is clear that poetry provides a challenge to English teachers, but as
Dymoke asserts ‘[t]his difficulty should not serve as an excuse for neglect.’ (2001, p.38)

Many educators have written extensively around strategies for the teaching of poetry and suggested exciting ways to engage students. In the anthology *Charged with meaning: Re-viewing English* Peter Adams, Wayne Sawyer, and Wakeling have provided innovative ideas for teaching poetry. In a 2014 *Idiom* article, Mary Weaven highlights the importance of giving students examples of high quality poetry to inform their own and to provide a guide for critical engagement with poetic texts. She suggests breaking down the teaching of poetry into three stages, focused on the preparation of oneself as a teacher, preparation of the poem, and then preparation of students: for Weaven preparedness is the key to confidence (Weaven, 2014). John Noell Moore’s reflective piece on his career as an English teacher in *The English Journal* gives engaging accounts of success and failure in poetry teaching. His technique of pairing poems that deal with common themes, and the examples that he provides, is a useful, practical teaching tool for entry into complex texts (Noell Moore, 2001).


In a study in the *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, which builds on Gannon’s 2001 research, Weaven and Tom Clark discuss their findings on English teachers’ attitudes to the implementation of the national curriculum, their positions on the teaching of poetry, and why is it ‘now almost entirely absent from the senior secondary ‘taught’ curriculum in … Victoria’ (2015, p. 162). While the study of poetry is a compulsory element of the English literature course, it is offered but frequently not taught in English. Weaven and Clark identify an apparent contradiction in teachers’ perceptions of the restrictions imposed by a ‘mandated’ national curriculum, and ‘teaching to the curriculum’ for standardised testing, and the desire to find ‘discretionary spaces’ within the curriculum (2015, p 162). The authors suggest that when English teachers are willing to work creatively with curriculum, they respond by developing their own teaching practice and strategies. A well designed curriculum can free up decision making, allowing further time to be spent on teaching areas like poetry (Weaven & Clark, 2015, 169).

In ‘Finding Yourself in Poetry’, Philippa Wintle reflects on successful strategies she uses to engage students with poetry by making it relevant to their lived and imagined lives. Her observations suggest that to teach poetry by beginning with an analysis of language and poetic devices can estrange students (2015, p.57). Wintle suggests teachers should initially examine poems though elements that students feel are meaningful for them such as ‘family, relationships, quality of life, perspective,
and empathy’ (2015, p.60). The context of a poem, what it is about, its meaning, can often capture a student’s attention, especially when they are able to relate it to their own lives, interests, or imagination. Wintle recounts how a student who struggled with language developed a profound connection with the world explored by the Beat poets (2015, p.63). Once the connection was made, the relevance of language and poetic devices became more clear and graspable. The strategy could act as an antidote to concerns voiced by teachers about students from poorer families lacking the cultural capital to access poetry (Weaven & Clark, 2015, p.165).

To deny students the experience of studying a poem in class is to deny them the opportunity to access the imagination and their own creativity. Teaching poetry through context, environment and imagery may offer ways of looking at Australia poetry in a relevant manner for students in the ‘here and now’. For most students the urban is the familiar – we are predominately city dwellers, some of us newly arrived. Martin Langford’s Harbour City Poems is a selection of classic and contemporary poems about the urban experience and the changing perception of Sydney, from the Blue Mountains to the Harbour Bridge. They offer us another opportunity for understanding meaning through something that is familiar but made different by the sounds and images created through words. Wallace-Crabbe asks what is it about the landscape that ‘looms so large as a test of things Australian?’ ‘Seemingly so easy to grasp, he suggests ‘landscape grows more and more problematic the closer one looks at it, or tries to look at it. It keeps escaping.’ (2005, p 125). Landscape, flora and fauna, are powerful elements of Australian poetry, having marked it out as different from British and European. The foundations of contemporary Australian poetry are a part of these traditions, along with the colonial, the subaltern and importantly, the indigenous, examples being Henry Lawson’s ‘Middleton Rouseabout’ (1890), Oodgeroo Noonucal’s lament ‘We are going’ (1964) and Les Murray’s ‘The Moon-Bone Cycle’ (1976). In Young Poets: An Australian Anthology, landscapes ‘recognisably Australian’ are still a powerful feature in many poets’ work. (2011, prefacing). Texts such as these can be drawn on to encourage Australian students to reflect on the changing environment in which they live, and issues to do with sustainability, and the quality and particularity of their lives.

Adolescence is considered by many experts to be a vulnerable and crucial time in the development of an ‘adult identity’ (Mercadal, 2014, p.2). During this time students experience a ‘negotiation’ between who they were as a child and who they are to become as an adult (Mercadal, 2014, p.2). As a form of self-expression poetry has been used as an effective means for students to explore, challenge and solidify their burgeoning self-identities (McCormick 2003; Kent 2005).

In autobiographical reasoning, a prominent theory of identity formation, narrative is used to ‘sort through past experiences to better understand one’s current state’ (Mercadal, 2014 p.2). As teachers, we are able to use literature and its forms to encourage students to investigate who they are (Rudd 2013, p. 690). Through its non-linear and flexible form poetry, so different from the sometimes ‘black and
white’ structure of prose, can allow students to ‘engage confusion’ and encourage the unconscious to enter consciousness (McCormick, 2003, p.122).

Self-expression is integral to the development of self and enables students to articulate ‘who one is’ (Tschivhase 2015, p. 379) or to share ‘how things appear from [their] point of view’ (Green 2007, p.1). In her study with disenfranchised youth in an urban American school, McCormick found that writing poetry enabled students to discard their defences and begin to express and define themselves (2003, p.112). Giving students the skills and the time to experiment with poetry helped in the formation and expression of their own identity in an otherwise oppressive setting (McCormick). Kent (2005, p. 201) has likewise found that poetry produced by students often moved past a response to a task and became an ‘attempt to understand and articulate their own place in the world’.

The uncertainty of adolescence also brings about a ‘heightened desire to belong’ (Mercadal, 2014, p.2). In her study of a group of slam poetry members, all self-labelled as ‘outcasts’, Rudd (2012) found that through this community these students were ‘actively constructing identities’ through their poetry. The safe space provided by the group allowed each individual to ‘nurture their...creative expression’ (Rudd 2012, p. 690). In his 1996 study Holman also found that the use of poetry can connect adolescents to their cultural heritage was an effective means of developing self-esteem. His study built on work done by Hynes and Hynes Berry on bibliotherapy and poetry therapy as a tool for developing self-worth and self-identity (cited in Holman 1996, p. 327). In an interview in 2004 poetry Hynes highlighted the benefit of poetry’s form in enabling the listener to explore the varied or personal meanings of a poem in relation to themselves (Rossiter 2004, p. 216). In her paper *Pear Trees and Poetry Crafting Identity in a Private Boarding School* Russell likewise documents how the poetry and literature of African Americans authors helped her define her own identity in a predominately white secondary school (2011).

Poetry, like all forms of self-expression, must be seen as a ‘representation’ of the self, not the self in its entirety – the ‘I’ in poetry is a persona (Tshivhase 2015, p. 376; McCormick 2003, p.123). This distinction can allow students to step away from their work and maintain face in front of peers while concurrently exploring their ‘multiple dimensions’ (McCormick 2003, p.123).

It is clear that teaching poetry has been a source of anxiety for many teachers. Yet despite well-documented apprehension around its teaching, in classrooms poetry has been effectively proven as both ‘a powerful tool for self affirmation’ (McCormick 2003, p. 127) and a means to encourage student’s to ‘confront deeply held beliefs and prejudices’ (Kent 2005 p.200).

Notes on collaboration

It is important to reflect on how the group collaborated to build this resource as in our professional lives as teachers, collaboration with colleagues will be a typical part
of our work. As outlined above, the group was concerned with creating a resource that has a life beyond the assessment task and thus we dedicated significant time to our collaborative work. As we come from a diverse range of undergraduate backgrounds – cinema studies, English literature, and media – we were able to draw on our respective fields to provide multiple frameworks for delivering lessons based on poetry.

During the residential period at the Warrnambool campus we met several times both formally and informally to unpack and refine the idea of ‘poetry’ that was discussed in the initial methods workshop. We took advantage of a Teach For Australia (TFA) led session on unit planning to clearly articulate the parameters for our resource, identifying curriculum strands and elaborations that aligned with our early thinking. During this workshop we received useful advice on the scope of our unit from a TFA advisor who warned against losing a concerted focus by attempting to cover too many curricular strands, and pointing out that each curricular strand can form the basis of an entire unit, particularly when the associated elaborations are considered.

In the time allocated to the virtual methods morning, the group came together to divide the resource into three succinct strands so that each member of the group could focus on area of learning that particularly interested them. This was an effective strategy for bringing our research and lesson planning together over the Christmas period given the fact that group members live in different states. The break necessitated online collaboration in the form of email and social media, and underscored the value of creating an online resource that can be accessed anywhere, anytime.

References


Kent, V 2005, ‘I want you to write me a poem…and I don’t want it to rhyme’, in B Doecke & G Parr (eds), Writing = Learning, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, 182-204.


