

Taking it personally – an approach to teaching Caribbean Poetry.

*The paper I delivered at the September conference was based on my findings planning and teaching a short course to Year 8 students (12yr olds). This is the report I wrote at the time.*

I decide that the scheme should have three main aims:

- 1) To 'discover' that there is such a thing as specific Caribbean poetry.
- 2) To explore a few key poetic principles that will help their study of any poetry.
- 3) To enjoy a creative interaction with some of my favourite poets.

I start by asking the students to pinpoint the Caribbean on a world map. Only a minority of the class are able to do this and, of these, only a very few are able to successfully identify individual islands. However almost all the class are able to tell me that the Caribbean is a hot and desirable holiday location.

The students look at the archipelago and we locate Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago. I ask the students what they think would be the good and bad points of living on a small island like Tobago. Students have animated discussions about living on an island and come up with a list of pros and cons. More detailed background knowledge is emerging and I hear students discussing hurricanes, floods and isolation along side the previous idealised image of beach life.

I give them a cloze activity based on Walcott's *Midsummer, Tobago*. Students have to locate Walcott's adjectives by the nouns they think they are most likely to be describing. Once they have chosen their versions I reveal the real version and ask them to discuss whether Walcott's version is a positive or negative view of Tobago. Most students think it is neither positive nor negative. A very bright girl explains that perhaps Walcott is saying that it is too hot even to have an opinion which I like.

Next I ask them to rewrite the poem using Walcott's structure, but considering their own environment in London in January. They are enthusiastic and produce some effortlessly beautiful poems (albeit deeply plagiaristic!) What all their poems show is how well a strong sense of 'place' roots a poem.

One student writes:

Cold car-infested streets

Blue wind

A grey classroom

A student

Lost in a lesson

Days I have gathered

Crispin Bonham-Carter

Days I have shivered

Days that never outgrow like  
The trust  
Between me and my brother.

Next lesson I continue this study of 'place'. I play them a piece of Calypso music and ask them to note down the feelings they associate with it. Next I ask them to consider the different ways they might feel on a hot day and on a cold day. Soon we have a table showing responses such as "relaxed, tired, happy, sweaty," versus "cross, shivery, depressed, sad". We read *Wherever I hang* by Grace Nichols and the students identify the details that Nichols uses to draw out the difference between the Caribbean and England. I ask them to imagine that they are Grace Nichols writing a letter home and describing the differences between London and home. This lesson also sparks off a conversation about immigration and family relations.

I want to tackle the history and politics of the Caribbean head-on and I start the next lesson by playing Bob Marley's *Buffalo Soldier* with the lyrics on the IWB and by asking the students to note down what the story in the song is about. They are clearly really enjoying the song and I'm slightly surprised to note that only two out of 26 seem to know it. They grasp the main points of the story and make the connection between slavery and the Caribbean. They have clearly been taught about the slave trade and are able to discuss significant details (the trade winds, the triangular route, the conditions on ships) with real knowledge.

I show them a picture of Toussaint L'Overture and they discuss why he might be considered a hero in the Caribbean. Next I put up a list of the final words from each poem taken from Edward Baugh's *Sometimes in the Middle of the Story* and I ask them to create their own poem using only those words.

It's fascinating how deeply involved the students are in this task. It reminds me how the chief difficulty of teaching poetry is its very openness. A student can quickly feel completely lost in an ocean of possible meanings and strange words. Yet in this task they are firmly held, forced to negotiate the poet's own words. A boy (who has only seen the final words in each line) writes:

Something like wind  
The blue Atlantic Sea  
The far journey  
Passing like peace  
A shuttle from war  
Broken children scream  
Muffled only by the bursting ocean

Next I ask them to close their eyes and listen carefully as I read Baugh's poem aloud. Afterwards they immediately note down any powerful images that it created in their heads. I explain how poets often want readers to 'see' their poems and I ask them to draw a cartoon version of the poem picking out the key images. Many of the students make a huge effort on their drawings and it's clear

that his images have really sunk in. A student later writes that this is her favourite activity of the course "as it lets us show you what the poet has shown us."

I want to bring the students up to date so in the next lesson I show them an image of Jamaican police arresting gang members in a shanty town and I ask them what social problems they think might exist in some parts of the Caribbean. After the students have identified problems associated with poverty, drugs, gang culture etc, I give them a cloze activity on Velma Pollard's *Beware the Naked man who offers you a shirt*. The students find this more difficult than I had imagined and I realise that it's time to tackle Nation Language more directly.

Next lesson I put up the following stanza of Linton Kwesi Johnson's *If I woz a Top-Natch Poet*. I ask the students to work out a standard English version.

*ah woodah write a poem  
soh dam deep  
dat it bittah-sweet  
like a precious  
memory  
whe mek yu weep  
whe mek yu feel incomplete*

The students love reading this and we have an animated discussion as to why Johnson's version is written like this. The students recognise at once that this is connected to identity and pride. I put up a Standard English version and we compare the effects. Next I give each group a stanza to read together. I encourage the class (mostly white Europeans) to use the spelling to celebrate the sound of Johnson's writing. I then conduct a class debate around Nation Language. I ask the students to arrange a selection of opinions depending on whether they agree. The statements are to do with the issues of teaching Standard English and whether it's right to use another person's accent when reading a poem. We decide that it's good to use other accents when reading, but that it should be done with respect.

I want to end the course with a sense of celebration and participation. We have a short discussion on what makes a really good reading of a poem. Then we watch John Agard performing *Mr Oxford Don*. They love it and identify in Agard's performance all the performance ideals (enthusiasm, volume, rhythm, gesture) that they have just discussed. I divide up Michael Smith's *Mi Cyaan believe it* among them. I tell them that each group will perform a reading of their section. The room is filled with energy and each group sets about their task with considerable gusto. I encourage them to explore the anger and the comedy as well as the rhythm and sound of the words. Groups of students are standing on chairs, waving their arms, drumming rhythms and celebrating the sounds of the poem. Later one student writes: "I loved the rhythm of the poem. It made it fun and entertaining for me and my group to perform. Also the way the words are written make you have an accent as soon as the words leave your lips." I am reminded of a conversation I had with John Agard on the first day of the course. He said that at his school the students were made to regularly recite poetry. He feels that when students recite they start to own the poems.