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# The best forms in the best order? Current poetry writing pedagogy at KS2

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## Abstract

This article considers the pedagogic assumptions of four writers in the post-war period who have contributed significantly in the UK to the teaching of poetry writing to children (Hughes, 1967; Brownjohn, 1980, 1982 and 1990, collected in 1994; Pirrie, 1987, republished in 1994; Rosen, 1989). This article critiques the approaches of these writers, and the assumptions underlying their practice, in the light of recent writing theory (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987; Sharples, 1999), which introduces the concepts of 'content' and 'rhetorical' space in writing. I argue that current recommendations (DfEE, 1998) are also flawed in that they provide teachers with a limited view of what poetry is, taking little account of the interrelationship between form and content in creating meaning. The article takes the form of an analysis of the intersection of these recommendations and the core literature described above arguing that their differing emphases place teachers at a disadvantage when thinking about pedagogy in this area.

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## Key Words

*key words needed here*

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### **Introduction**

My reasons for writing this paper stem from my own experience as a published poet and visiting writer in schools, as well as primary school teacher. My own experience as a writer (and reader) of poetry has highlighted to me the importance of the interrelationship between form and content in creating meaning. As a teacher and researcher I am interested in how children come to perceive this relationship and demonstrate it in their own poetry writing. I believe in fostering in children both experiment with form and development of voice. As I have argued elsewhere (Wilson, 2001) I do not think promoting one necessitates exclusion of the other. My own view, informed by all these perspectives, is that current recommendations (DfEE, 1998) at Key Stage 2 (KS2) promote poetry writing in a form-driven way; while the core literature available to teachers focuses largely on content of pupils' writing. This is a potentially frustrating situation, which limits the development of an effective pedagogy for the teaching of poetry writing.

My shorthand for this core literature (Hughes, 1967; Brownjohn, 1980, 1982 and 1990, collected in 1994; Pirrie, 1987, republished in 1994; Rosen, 1989) is to name it the 'handbook literature' of poetry writing pedagogy. As the word 'handbook' suggests, these books are practical in their approach. What each of them also contains, however, is a good deal of rhetorical material, in which the author lays out the theory which underpins his or her own distinctive approach to teaching poetry writing. I shall argue that, while this literature provides us with challenging metaphors for poetry writing pedagogy, it is, nevertheless, flawed. In part this is because the Romantic tradition upon which it draws was itself limited, locating its arguments on children's writing largely around the content of their writing and ignoring issues to do with form. The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) recommendations for poetry writing could be seen to answer that problem. My critique of these will demonstrate that they do not present a holistic view of poetry, nor a coherent pedagogy for poetry writing.

### **The Content and Rhetorical Spheres of Writing**

The inter-relationship between content and form in writing has been the focus of the cognitive studies of Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987). In particular, they distinguish between the developing writer who is primarily concerned with what to say and writes a flow of thoughts in which one idea triggers the next, without any overall macro structure or sense of audience or goal, and the more confident writer who can manage both the communicative message of their writing, the content, and the rhetorical shaping of the piece for maximum effect. Sharples (1999) pursues further this concept of content and rhetorical space thinking in writing. Operating in both spheres, he says, is important to transform knowledge an experience, a key feature of poetic writing. We

might say the former tackles the problem of 'What to say' and the latter of 'How to say it'. He explores their work by building on, in particular, their concept of writing as 'knowledge-telling' and 'knowledge-transforming' (1999:22). Knowledge-telling is a kind of 'what-next?' process, where 'each idea must act as a cue to the next one' and where 'there is no space for reflection' (1999:22). Sharples claims this works well for 'many traditional classroom writing topics'. Because it is similar to recounting an event through talk, 'it does not demand new powers of reasoning, so the child can concentrate on the flow of ideas and language' (ibid).

Sharples also finds in Bereiter and Scardamalia's work a description of knowledge transformation as 'a mental dialogue between content and rhetoric' (1999: 23). The same constraints exist as for knowledge-telling, but the crucial difference is that the writer 'forms some of them into explicit mental spaces' (ibid). This is the kind of developed thinking which might prevent children making the following statements and questions as they write: 'I don't know how to do this' and 'I don't know what comes next'. I want to suggest there is a particular set of problems posed by poetry writing in relation to this theory. If the content space is not sufficiently stimulated, there may result poetry writing which is lacklustre: the child's interests, beliefs, experiences or values may simply not have been aroused. If the rhetorical space is not provided with sufficient information about how to structure the writing there may result poems which express great interest but shut the reader out because of their lack of shape or coherence. If on the other hand the rhetorical information is provided at the expense of arousing children's interest there may result poems which dutifully jump through 'poetic hoops' but give no real sense of 'life'.

It is worth reflecting on how different poetry is from most writing in school. It is not 'knowledge-telling' in the same way a story, a recount, or a set of instructions is. Not only is its function different, it looks different as well. This may well be one reason why children experience difficulties with writing poetry, in spite of their enjoyment of reading, hearing, sharing, and performing it, because it makes demands on their thinking in ways in which other writing in school does not. My own observed experience of teaching poetry writing and running poetry workshops suggests that rhetorical space thinking may present a particular challenge to young writers of poetry. In poetry writing, knowledge about style and structure are hard to master because they require children to know about the possibilities of poetry, which is dependent on reading and/or being shown a wide variety of poems. As children become more accustomed to the scope of poetry, however, one might expect them to operate in the rhetorical sphere more confidently, as they use it to demonstrate both their engagement and understanding of 'form'.

### **Pedagogy and poetic forms in the NLS**

One potential danger of the view of poetry writing currently promulgated in the NLS (DfEE, 1998) is that children do indeed increase their knowledge of form but without a corresponding sense of the way it is used to create meaning. In defence of these recommendations, the programme of poetry to be read and written by children at KS2 is very thorough and covers a lot of ground. Reading the Strategy's proposed range of poetry for each term one could argue that it might be the making of poetry teaching, in that the activities and reading material proposed are no longer *ad hoc*, yet are open enough for teachers to develop and administer according to their own tastes and reading.

There is a real attempt throughout the recommendations for poetry composition to strike a balance between four aspects of writing which run through the Strategy as a whole. I have identified these as: writing from models/established forms; practising the process of writing (including performance); learning about techniques; and experimentation with language. Taken together, and taught in a balanced, effective way, these aspects fulfil Cox's desire to see children learning the craft of writing and beginning to behave like real writers (1991:24).

However, one could also say that despite its attempt to hold in equilibrium aspects of composition which are common to writing of all kinds (drafting, polishing and editing), the view the NLS takes of poetry writing is very much form-driven. In other words, the development in poetry writing which the NLS describes is centred on children progressing through a series of adult-made forms or 'types' of poetry, not on the demands which these forms make on children's learning. For example, in Year 4 Term 3 the range of forms to be studied includes: haiku, cinquain, couplets, list, thin poems, alphabets, conversations, monologues, syllabics, prayers, epitaphs, songs, rhyming forms and free verse. This, by any standard, is a huge range for children and their teachers to cover. Leaving aside arguments about the desirability and possibility of covering such a range in so short a space of time, one is left asking how these forms actually relate to each other in terms of learning. The haiku and cinquain forms, for example, with their concentration of precision and forging of image and feeling, are part of the same family as syllabics, but could not be more different in purpose and style to list poems and monologues, with their emphasis on accumulation of detail and the spoken voice. This creates the impression that the forms of poetry to be studied appear in a somewhat arbitrary order in the Strategy. For example, why children have to wait until Year 6 to study Shakespeare is not explained; nor is the large amount of content to be covered in Year 4 Term 3 compared with other Years.

Another criticism one could make of these recommendations is that there is not enough mention of writing poems from personal experience, or from personal feelings (Y4, T1 and Y5, T1 only), both of which one would expect to see featured more in this genre of writing especially. These are the only hints in the Strategy regarding poetry composition which suggest that the point of teaching poetry might be about something other than form and structure, the preservation of feelings or experience, for example. The view of poetry writing taken by the NLS would therefore seem to be one that is form or even technique driven. At its worst this could ensure that children have a wide experience of different forms of poetry, but with no real sense of what makes poetry poetry; or put another way, little sense of the interrelationship between form and meaning. We might say, therefore, that if the poetic forms in the NLS do indeed grow harder they still tell us very little about the kind of learning involved in writing them.

One can speculate that the concentration upon form in the Strategy might be because it is deemed easier to describe development in that way. For example, 'to study in depth one genre and produce an extended piece of similar writing, e.g. for inclusion in a class anthology' (Y6, T2) might appear 'harder' to achieve than '[using] the structures of poems read to write extensions based on these' (Y5, T2) because it involves writing more, not because the learning is significantly different. While the notion of development is made implicit in these recommendations, therefore, the order of the work recommended does not relate to the explicit demands on thinking and learning involved in writing poems as unique ways of writing and communicating meaning.

It is as though the accumulation of forms by children is important, rather than the in-depth engagement of their thinking about how working within poetic form forces the writer to adjust and adapt language, thought and feeling.

### **The influence of the Romantic tradition on poetry pedagogy**

This view of poetry writing pedagogy is in sharp contrast to the handbook literature which preceded it. A picture of how it is possible for children to engage with form is presented with varying degrees of clarity throughout its core texts. Only Rosen (1989) and Brownjohn (1994) tackle it explicitly, while Hughes (1967) and Pirrie (1994) remain largely silent on the issue. Prefiguring these writers, and influencing the latter pair particularly on the issue of form, is Hourd (1949).

Unapologetically Romantic in tradition from the outset, the book is 'bookended' by key texts by Wordsworth and Coleridge, namely *The Prelude and Biographia Literaria*. The former is a highly suggestive passage which makes a comparison between the child being suckled in

infancy to the power of nature and great 'works' to develop the senses and the feelings. There is, therefore, a Romantic emphasis on 'improvement' of the person, and on the potential of great poetry to sensitise the feelings as an aid in this process. This reliance on the works of others is underlined further when Hourd says: '[We need] Shakespeare, Keats and Coleridge amongst others to appreciate the child's drama and composition... when he becomes creative in the presence of creators only the highest standards are appropriate to his efforts' (1949:17). Ironically, this could, also, perhaps, be read as prefiguring the NLS, with its emphasis on using established writers as models.

Hourd's second key text, by Coleridge, emphasises 'the synthetic and magical power... of [the poet's] Imagination' (174). The reading and enjoying of poetry is seen as the beginning of a process, which, for Hourd, would result in children writing their own. The final difference between Hourd and the current context is that Hourd was happy, with Coleridge, to trust in this process as something magical, alchemical even, without describing the pedagogy of that process fully. It is my contention that the handbook literature since Hourd is still influenced by such notions, resulting in a strong emphasis on content space thinking.

### **Different views of children's maturity as poets**

The emphasis in Hourd on the child as it were using the writing to explore themselves in a way unique to him/her is one which can also be found in Hughes (1967) and Pirrie (1994). Among the Romantically-influenced views espoused by Hughes are an emphasis on the child as idealised artist/creator; and on the child being able to solve the problems of poetic composition without outside intervention.

Hughes's concept of 'having something to say', (Hughes, 1967:12), like 'voice' (Andrews, 1989), is a complex and suggestive metaphor to use when talking about children and writing. However, it takes for granted that the child wants to articulate certain things as though these already exist before the moment of writing, or are 'outside' of the writer's control. Bruner (1979) describes this as a problem of 'detachment and commitment' (23), claiming that mature writers come to 'externalise' (25) the piece they are working on. Quoting Freud, he says it is as though the writer begins to see the work as "out there" (ibid). The problem with this as a metaphor for teachers to use and adapt is that we are not speaking of mature writers, but of children, who are still learning not only the transcriptional aspects of writing but to think of writing as a 'process of discovery' (Odell, 1980:140) as well. In this way they may have no desire to 'say' anything at all, for themselves, or to a reader they have not met. The concept of 'having something to say' requires a metacognitive maturity, therefore, what we might call an ability to think

outside of their writing, which we cannot always assume children possess.

The way the NLS seeks to solve this problem is by focussing attention on published poems and forms as models on which children can base their own work. If these are taught holistically, in which form is seen as a contribution to creating specific meanings and in which its interrelationship with meaning is made clear, the advantages are many. If, however, form is taught for its own sake, as just another in a list of techniques to be learned, it becomes difficult to see how children and teachers can retain a sense of poetry as a vehicle for preserving or engaging with personal experience.

In contrast, Hughes's idea of the child solving the problems of composition is centred not on the way the apprentice uses models to help him/her develop, as promulgated in the NLS. Nor is it based on the intervention of teachers, for example by modelling and demonstration, also promoted in the Strategy. The answer is instead located in the self:

*Imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it. Do not think it up laboriously, as if you were working out mental arithmetic. Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it. When you do this, the words look after themselves, like magic (1967:18).*

Like much of Hughes's work on teaching poetry writing, this is compelling and persuasive. However, for children who find it hard to 'imagine' in this 'magic' way, it offers no assurance of success. It is no more helpful to children who struggle with writing, nor to teachers unconfident of teaching poetry, but wanting to find 'techniques' of teaching it, than the NLS, with its concentration on forms over personal experience.

### **'Setting children free' as poets**

After Hughes the writer in the recent literature whose voice and rationale most closely resembles the post-war Romantic view is Jill Pirrie (1994). Pirrie, in an elegant description of her practice, states that teachers 'must set boundaries, impose constraints, in order to set free...we are, above all, asking them to remember with a special intensity...I have found that these problems can only be resolved through a literature-based syllabus' (1994:4-5).

Ironically, Pirrie's view, above, chimes with the NLS very sweetly. The difference between them is that, for Pirrie, form is a means to an end, the 'remembering with intensity', while, in the Strategy, rehearsing different forms is an end in itself. There is however, much that is left

unexplained in Pirrie, particularly in relation to the issue of form.

In Hourd (1949) the poetry by children is mostly tightly metrical and rhyming, while in Pirrie (1994) it is for the large part non-metrical free verse. What both writers remain silent on is the issue of organization of the writing: that is, how they asked their classes to operate within the 'rhetorical sphere'. One senses the presence of a 'hidden curriculum'; that which is valued but not spoken about. Finding a form and being 'set free' for these young writers has involved being guided to forms of poetry, one assumes, which Hourd and Pirrie value. To take one brief example from Pirrie (1994), we find the poem 'Rachel' (92), about a newborn baby sister. Pirrie tells us that the poem has been crafted with 'all the necessary detachment' (ibid), a fair and accurate summary of a controlled and powerful poem. However, we are not told how the author (aged 12) arrived at such deft handling of line breaks, what Helen Vendler (1986) calls the 'strange process of self-interruption, its pause[s] at the end of each line' (2):

*Her fascinating face is chubby,  
Lively,  
But peaceful.  
Grown far too big,  
Spindly arms and legs sticking out.  
She doesn't cry.  
My four hour old sister  
Is contented,  
Lying in my arms (1994:92).*

This lack of pedagogical clarity is disappointing because, how one teaches a child to lay out poetry in this way, in the words of Ted Hughes, so 'concentratedly' (1982:13), should be as of much interest to teachers as how they develop children's content space thinking. This is because, since the work of Modernist poets, e e cummings and William Carlos Williams to name only two, it has been an accepted notion that how a poem appears on the page, including where the lines break, affects the way the poem is read. My criticism of Pirrie's approach is that underlying it is the assumption that this difficult area for children to understand is, as it were, left to sort it self out; or in the words of Hughes: 'the words look after themselves' (1967:18). For many children, and their teachers, this is a far from simple process.

This is in sharp contrast to the poetry writing pedagogy promoted in the NLS. The danger for teachers, is that those seeking a less form-centred view of poetry writing, find in the work of Hughes, Pirrie and Hourd, with its trust in the child as artist and in the 'magic' of the creative process, a lack of real openness about how to help children of all

abilities concentrate their thinking equitably in both content and rhetorical spheres.

### **'Frameworks' that teach the craft of poetry?**

Brownjohn's talk of 'frameworks' (1994:10, 14) promotes a view of teaching poetry writing which is designed to 'take the pressure off' children. In this way her work anticipates much practice that is promulgated by the NLS. This is a potentially limiting approach because, in her own words 'the form/framework is set and is one problem fewer to think about' (1994:10). In other words, if children follow, as it were, preordained forms to write in, then the only way for them to show development is in their content space thinking, because the rhetorical space thinking has already been done for them. In practice, however, reading the children's poems Brownjohn presents, this is not borne out. There are two further dangers of this approach I would, however, point to.

The first is that, with Pirrie, she is silent on the process of teaching children the art and craft of delineating their poems into verse. An example of this is in the poem *The Welsh Mountain Pony*:

*His hooves are like pebbles on a beach  
Tattooing a steady pace.  
His mane is like watered silk  
As it flows in the wind.  
His legs, small but fast-moving,  
Beat out a canter to the horizon* (1994:118).

As in the example from Pirrie, above, this is well-observed writing of a high order. Each aspect of the horse, its hooves, mane and legs, are given two lines, with the line breaks falling naturally, at the end of each phrase. How the child has been taught to organise their work in this way, however, remains a mystery. This is, again, disappointing. It leaves the reader to guess at how one might encourage children to craft their poems. A hint of the underlying assumptions of this approach appear in the chapter on 'Patterns', which are described as being like a frameworks 'which help[...] the poem almost to write itself' (1994:123). This is comparable with Hughes's comment above that poems look after themselves, 'like magic', and does not reveal to the teacher unconfident with teaching poetry how such results might be achieved.

The second danger of Brownjohn's approach is that of compartmentalisation. By this I mean she does indeed devote a good deal of space to rhetorical space thinking, namely her chapters on given poetic forms in Section 2 (1994:143-194), which are, nevertheless, separate from the rest of the book. Once again, for teachers unconfident

about poetry, it is surely important to give advice on form and content simultaneously, not to separate them. This contrasts with Rosen (1989), as I say below, where advice on content and rhetorical space thinking are given equal prominence. 'Form', in Brownjohn, is not used as a vehicle for talking about the inter-relationship between form and meaning, but merely a 'vessel' for generating more content.

### **Free verse as a 'preferred form'**

This is a concern Rosen makes much of (1989:44). He is keen to point out that in practice 'subjective experience' and 'abstract form' are neither separate nor indivisible, and that we only separate them 'in our minds as an act of logic' (47): 'In the reality of reading or writing 'the way something is written' and 'what is written' interact with each other in our consciousness' (ibid). This is the closest the handbook literature comes to acknowledging that content and rhetorical space thinking need to be given equal prominence in the classroom. In contrast to Pirrie and Brownjohn, Rosen is keen to promote practice where the form of a piece of writing 'arises out of the subjective' (ibid). He openly acknowledges that this gives the child a more central role in deciding what to write about and how that writing will be shaped.

This is a real innovation in poetry writing pedagogy, but nevertheless has limitations. Rosen is keen to point out that free verse is not one kind of poetic technique only, and that it has many variants, including use of repetition, patterns of phrasing, and even occasional rhyme (1989:45). The danger of relying on this as an approach, however, is that children can become over-used to one register of poetic writing, that is, personally subjective and anecdotal, to judge by the examples he presents. Children surely need to understand that poetry writing can encompass these, but that it has many other occasions as well. Just as the readers of Brownjohn and Pirrie are left having to guess at how young writers are to be taught to lay out their poetry in lines, Rosen's readers are left in no doubt that, with the exception of using rhyme and metre for nonsense verse, free verse is the 'preferred form'. One could argue, however, that, while he takes into account that other free verse forms exist, Rosen does not give much credence to the line of thinking about free verse which says that each new example of it is a form in its own right. Rosen's version of free verse, described above, while useful and liberating, can become as 'privileged' a form as those promoted by the NLS.

Another issue here is that, since Modernism, the kinds of free verse quoted by Rosen approvingly (1989:41) have become as accepted a part of 'literary tradition' as limericks, cinquains and haikus (88). His implicit point is that while these free verse forms are harder to imitate they are paradoxically better at capturing natural speech rhythms, what he memorably calls 'the knowledge children already possess' (43). The

limitation of this is that it denies children the chance to play with the same speech rhythms within more 'constraining' forms, something poets say they value highly (Koch, 1999:72-75; Longley, in Curtis, 1996:119; Paterson, *ibid*:162). As poet Peter Sansom says: 'Poetry is not any old conversation. It is not ordinary but heightened language. We cannot write nowadays what we wouldn't actually say. But it's worth remembering that we say, in certain circumstances, some pretty remarkable things and in remarkable ways' (1994:41). What both the Rosen and Brownjohn approaches do not account for is the possibility that a child, having drafted a poem in free verse or iambic pentameter, say, might then decide to re-draft it in another form altogether.

This could also be said of the NLS, which present poetic forms as discrete 'units' of learning in themselves. This is perhaps the biggest failing of the Strategy's presentation of poetry, that it misunderstands the function of form, reducing it to something which can be identified, categorised and then 'applied' in writing. For poets, even ones as varied as those mentioned above, the choice of form is uniquely related in every poem to the intentions of the writing, which are then subject to change, not an arbitrarily chosen facet adopted for reasons of 'style'.

### **Conclusion**

With its emphasis on content, engagement, and children's voices, the valuable handbook literature on poetry writing pedagogy has much of its roots in Romanticism. With its emphasis on form, but not on the uses to which form is put or how it can be adapted, the NLS, it could be argued, is one form of reaction against it. Indeed, it is possible to speculate that the NLS has become another handbook for teaching poetry writing in its own right, but without supplying teachers with any sense of pedagogy; nor on the demands poetic forms make on children's thinking and learning. We could say, therefore, that the NLS concentration on form is itself poorly conceptualised, and is in danger of promoting to children and teachers a view of poetry which takes little account of direct personal experience. It is as though we say to children, in the words of Rosen (1989:44): 'A sonnet is good for describing something and saying what you think about it. A ballad is good for telling a story and a haiku is good for a glimpse at something.' Rosen's satire has an uneasy ring of truth about it, and makes the point that poetic form is fluid, which can be subverted. The NLS view of this is as unsatisfactory as the Romantic concentration on words looking after themselves like magic, spontaneously overflowing with emotion as Wordsworth would have it.

The handbook literature, in contrast, influenced by the Romantic tradition, focuses largely on the 'content' space thinking of poetry writing to the detriment of lengthy discussion on 'rhetorical' space thinking. This also puts teachers and children at a disadvantage when thinking about

pedagogy in this area because, aside from the language they use in their poems, children can demonstrate their engagement with their subject matter and with poetic form itself, as well as create meaning, by the way they organize their work, including line and stanza breaks.

There is, therefore, still no coherence in the literature about poetry writing pedagogy. The NLS appears to encourage children to experiment with form/structure and language, while making decisions about the suitability of the forms they choose, the result of which is an explicit increase in knowledge about poetic techniques such as syllables, alliteration and figurative language; and about aspects common to all composition such as polishing and editing. For whom these forms are supposed to be 'suitable' is not discussed, however, nor are the criteria by which teachers and children might discuss such matters. Discussions between teachers and children about all of the above are essential to teaching poetry writing. To take just one example, instead of talking about haiku in terms of form, would it not be more profitable to talk about the *demands* of the form on children's thinking as they write? It may be a more useful objective for children to grasp the essence of that form, the glimpse, in Rosen's words, than the three-line 5, 7, 5 syllabic pattern. Such an approach is not to deny the importance of knowing about numbers of syllables, but to emphasise that poetic composition must always, finally, be about how one writer at one time focuses attention on experience, however abstract, and through form and language, chooses to represent it in such a way that satisfies the demands of the moment and of the craft.

If we are serious, as educators, about wanting children to know the craft and discipline of poetry writing on one hand, and freedom and autonomy on the other, we need to find a vocabulary to describe that pedagogy which says that these qualities are not self-exclusive and that promoting one does not mean having to shun the other.

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