



Our Art Projects ▾

Mission, Vision & Values ▾

The ARC

The Weekly ▾

The Monthly

The Directory ▾

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🔍 Search

[Home](#) » [Poetry in Motion Schools](#), [The Monthly](#) » The Importance of Poetry with Daniel Xerri – lecturer at the Centre for English Language Proficiency, University of Malta

The Importance of Poetry with Daniel Xerri – lecturer at the Centre for English Language Proficiency, University of Malta

Poetry

in [Poetry in Motion Schools](#), [The Monthly](#)

Could you give our readers some information regarding your background and the issues you cover in your academic writing?

I'm a lecturer at the Centre for English Language Proficiency, University of Malta. My postgraduate teaching focuses on the continuing professional development of teachers of English but I'm also responsible for teaching reflective writing to undergraduate students. I hold a PhD in Education from the University of York and my thesis focused on the interplay between attitudes, beliefs and practices in English teaching and learning. Ever since my childhood, I've always been highly interested in poetry.

Once I became a researcher, I started investigating poetry education in Malta and internationally. This has led me to interview educators, students and poets about their views in

[The Directory](#) 🔍

[The Weekly](#)

[The Monthly](#)

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relation to poetry teaching, learning and assessment. Most of my writing focuses on issues related to English education, with a particular emphasis on young people's engagement with poetry.

How did you become aware of Community Arts Partnership and in particular CAP's Poetry in Motion Project?

In September 2015 I was in Belfast for the British Educational Research Association Conference where I talked about my work on poetry education. Prior to my trip I contacted a few Irish poets asking for an interview. One of them was the spoken word performer Cat Brogan. She put me in touch with Chelley McLear and that's how I learnt about the wonderful Poetry in Motion Project.



Poetry in Motion students reciting their work at the Waterfront Hall in 2014

Would you say it is important to emphasise, as CAP does, that poetry has a democratic aspect to it; that everyone has the capacity to write poetically and that everyone should be offered access to effective education which shows how to do that?

Yes, this is something I've always firmly believed in. However, my research shows that not everyone shares this view. Some teachers and students are still under the impression that poetry writing is only available to those born with a 'talent' for it.

Moreover, thanks to my interviews with educators and poets in countries like Australia, the UK and the USA, I found that poetry is still viewed as an elitist genre which is intrinsically difficult to understand. These entrenched beliefs lead teachers and students to view it solely as an academic subject which cannot be read for pleasure. In addition, in certain contexts access to poets in schools is only made available to the 'best' students because of the misconception that you need to be academically oriented in order to appreciate poetry. CAP and other organisations are doing invaluable work in seeking to dispel such myths.

With regards to young people would you consider it problematic to concentrate on teaching poetry primarily as a written art form rather than a more holistic approach which includes performance and publication?

This is one of the fundamental problems in poetry education internationally. The poet and academic Sue Dymoke says that if we leave poetry on the printed page we risk sounding its death knell. In order for young people to value the multimodal nature of poetry, it is important to provide them with plenty of opportunities to attend poetry performances as well as to encourage them to write, perform and publish poetry. CAP's Poetry in Motion for Schools is doing an excellent job in this regard. I've researched similar projects in Australia and California and they are all seeking to challenge students' misconceptions about poetry by showing them how it is a living art form that can be written and performed by anyone with a love for words and the musicality of language.

Could you elaborate on Pugliese's concept of the 'dynamism of creativity'?

Pugliese conceives of creativity as a dynamic phenomenon that can be nurtured in all young people rather than it being something static that you're either born with or not. In my recent work on creativity, I'm exploring the implications of this conception of creativity for the English classroom. Unfortunately, just like the idea that poets are born rather than made, there are still many misconceptions about creativity. It tends to be associated solely with Big-C creativity, whereas small-c creativity is completely disregarded. If teachers and other stakeholders were to re-evaluate their beliefs about creativity, there is the possibility for creativity education to become an essential part of young people's learning experience.

How important is the role of the teacher in being an active participant in the writing of poetry in the classroom?

Research indicates that if we want young people to enjoy poetry writing, then as teachers we need to position ourselves as writers of poetry. For this to happen though, teachers need to be provided with the necessary support so that they can develop the knowledge, skills and beliefs needed to do this effectively. Unless teachers are encouraged to boost their confidence as writers, they will be unable to position themselves as role models for their students.

What do you think about the approach being suggested in the quote below?

The poet Kwame Alexander suggests that when seeking to engage young people with poetry, 'You have to be willing to "dance naked on the floor," to put yourself out there... I shared my own poetry and let them see that I was going to be vulnerable to them.'

In my opinion Kwame Alexander is talking about the importance of teachers mustering the courage to share their poetry with

students. This will obviously be difficult at first because we might feel that in sharing our writing we are exposing ourselves to judgement, criticism or ridicule. However, it makes little sense to expect our students to do so while we just watch from the side lines.



Kwame Alexander

Would you see the use of working poets in the classroom, whether page or performance, as a useful element in developing students as writers of poetry or creative writing?

Yes, I think the poetry of working poets is an important resource because it helps to show students that poetry is a living art form and not only something associated with the canonical texts that they might be asked to study for examination purposes. Using contemporary poetry in one's lessons makes the genre seem more relevant to young people. Moreover, by encountering the work produced by poets writing in the present cultural milieu, students might develop an interest in material they can read or watch online or even poetry events they might decide to attend in person.

Finally – why does the teaching of poetry matter?

Teaching poetry matters because young people have a right to engage with an art form that can provide them with intense pleasure through its use of sound and play with language, the deep insights into the human condition that it can sometimes afford, as well as the conduit it offers to the myriad human experiences from past and present. In addition, research indicates that through the reading, writing and performance of poetry the individual accrues various intellectual and emotional benefits. All three forms of engagement need to form part of young people's poetry education. One can only hope that teaching is sufficiently multifaceted for young people's experience of poetry to prove enriching rather than alienating.



Daniel Xerri – .B.A.(Hons),P.G.C.E.,M.A.,M.Ed.,Ph.D.(York)

See Daniel's website at the link below

www.danielxerri.com

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CONTACT US

CAP artist &
facilitator area

(password required)



7 Donegall Street Place, Donegall Street, Belfast. Northern
Ireland. BT1 2FN

TEL: +44(0)2890923493

EMAIL: info@capartscentre.com

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