

Nicholas Mazza's RES Poetry Therapy Model: An Innovative Method to Teach Poetry in the Context of Indian Schools

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Abstract

Poetry has a special place in the lives of human beings. It has been one of the most famous mediums which humans have used to understand the self and navigate the world for centuries. The relationship of students with poetry is determined and established based on the kind of exposure and orientation that the students receive towards poetry in their school. This research paper is an attempt to understand poetry in general and the place of poetry in the context of Indian culture in particular. How poetry teaching is approached in the context of Indian schools has also been explored. After overviewing the scenario of poetry teaching in the Indian schools, the idea/field of poetry therapy has been introduced. Further, the paper is a study of how the horizon of poetry teaching can be expanded by highlighting/exploiting/tapping the potential of poetry therapy to poetry teaching. How Nicholas Mazza's RES Poetry Therapy Models can be integrated with poetry teaching has been discussed. A sample poetry teaching plan based on the RES Model has been provided to justify how it can be applied in the context of Indian schools.

Keywords: Poetry, Indian culture, Poetry teaching in Indian Schools, Poetry Therapy, RES Model.

INTRODUCTION

Humans are very special beings. Unlike animals, humans are gifted with both the ability to feel and think and also with a deep desire to express them. The deep desire to express can be considered a reason why from the inception of human history we find traces of human interaction with multiple art forms. Poetry has been one of the ancient art forms which humans have used to express themselves. Poetry is as old as human civilization. In the words of Shelley, "Poetry is connate with the origin of man" (225). The word poetry "comes from the Greek word Poiesis which means making" (Harper). Since the inception of human civilization, humans have tried to understand and engage with the art form known as poetry.

Many poets and critics have tried to define poetry. One of the most famous definitions comes from the romantic poet William Wordsworth who defines poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its

origins from emotion recollected in tranquility" (180). On the other hand, T.S Eliot in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" defines poetry from a completely different angle when he says, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (Eliot 295).

Further, according to Robert Frost, the American poet: "A poem begins with a lump in the throat, a homesickness or a love-sickness. It is a reaching out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where the emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words" ("qt. in Robert Frost Quotes"). Samuel Taylor Coleridge adds one more dimension when he says poetry is "the best words in the best order" ("qt. in Samuel Taylor Coleridge Quotes"). Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer says "What is poetry? you ask while fixing your blue pupil on mine. What is poetry! And you are asking me? Poetry...is you" ("qt. in "Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer quotes"). In the project entitled "The Uses of Poetry: Measuring the Value of Engaging with Poetry in Lifelong Learning and Development", poetry is defined as "a cultural artefact of a symbolic kind that is used to mediate the individual perceiver- subject's activity in the social world" (Rumbold et.al 5).

From the overflow of emotions to escape from emotion, from emotion and thoughts found words to the best word in the best order, from poetry is you to poetry as a cultural artifact, from patterned language to means to make a pattern out of life - all of these definitions put across different dimensions of poetry and highlight the fact that how difficult it is to define poetry. Different people at different times with their different contexts have tried to define poetry in their way. David Burke in his article "Teaching the Terrain of Poetry", puts it very aptly, the best way to understand poetry is "as a terrain whose boundaries are forever under dispute" (26). Poetry by nature encourages the space of inclusion where every voice is given importance and every voice matters. So, the very act of defining poetry cannot follow a single narrative.

POETRY AND INDIAN CULTURE

After understanding poetry in general, let us see what place poetry has in Indian culture. Poetry has always been an integral part of the culture. Since the very beginnings of literature, the importance of poetry has been well acknowledged, nurtured, and celebrated in Indian culture.

Rupi Kaur, a contemporary poet and the author of the best seller book of poetry collection *Milk and Honey*, in her Ted talk "I'm Taking My Body Back," justifies why she has chosen poetry as a medium to reclaim herself, She said:

I come from a tradition of poetry. Being raised in a Sikh household, every instance of my life from birth has been informed by poetry. Sikh scriptures are written in poetic verse. It was on the lips of my mother as she rocked me to sleep, it was on the lips of her mother whose own mother rocked her to sleep as they traveled an ox cart through the carnage and pillage of the South Asian partition. The poetry is Punjabi, Persian, Braj, and Sanskrit. It is how millions view life, in concert, constructed by the languages of nomads, warriors, and mystics. Even our names are picked from poems written hundreds of years ago. When I'll decide to marry, it will be poetry that will bond that marriage. And even when I pass, it will be poetry that will mark my departure. And so, it comes as no surprise, I think, that I would use writing poetry as a means to reclaim this body, to find a home here again (Kaur).

She in her talk, very beautifully summarizes the fact how deeply poetry is ingrained in Indian culture. Though she narrates this from her context of being born in a Sikh family, the same experience can be applied in the context of most Indian families. Simple observations and reflections can help one to find the traces of poetry in our cultural life. From Vedas to religious scriptures, all the major literature of our culture is written in the form of verse. From saints to social reformers most of them have spread their message using poetry as a tool. Poetry has always been a carrier of knowledge and wisdom. Even a glimpse of poetry can be found in daily habits and traditional practices. Mother's lullaby is made of verse, Daily prayers are nothing but poetic verse, any auspicious ceremony is incomplete without shloka and songs. If someone reflects deeply, it is nothing but a variation of the medium of poetry.

Hence it is not difficult to understand that since the beginning, poetry is deeply imbibed in our culture. But with technical advancement, technological advances, modern lifestyle, focus on employment and economic development have created little distance between our way of living and this ancient art form. Today if we see the actual use of poetry we can easily sense that poetry has just got limited to a subject matter which is taught in schools and universities and has been narrowed down to a few

professionals who are related to poetry by profession or hobby. Conscious awareness of the importance of poetry in our daily life is declining. Baxi also echoes the same about the decline of poetry by contrasting the past glorified status of poetry to present sad spectacle in the context of India. He says:

Once upon a time, poetry was the central force to Indians, formulating their attitude to the myriad forms of life around them and the universe. It prospered through times of oral poetry to the period when 'word' acquired 'print' to its old 'sound' structure. However, in recent times, the old Indian tradition of poetry, as a force defining the Indian face, has been replaced by the sad spectacle of its reification and denunciation by the readers. Regrettably, this attitude is evident not only in the general reading public but also in the student community who study English poetry formally as a process of academic growth (40).

POETRY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIAN SCHOOLS

After a glance at the place of poetry in Indian culture in general, we now explore how poetry is approached in the context of Indian schools. In the context of Indian schools, English is taught under the umbrella term of the subject named English. Different genres of literature like the story, poetry, play, essay, letter, etc are introduced to students in their English textbooks to expose them to different uses of the English language. It is believed that exposure to different kinds of literature can help students develop their communication and language skills. As mentioned in *First Flight*, the NCERT textbook of class X under the section "To the Teacher":

The English curriculum emphasizes providing a variety of rich, comprehensible inputs to learners to enable their engagement in learning; and on recognizing the multilingualism of everyday experience in India. This textbook aims at helping the learner to read for meaning in context, thus providing a bank of language to serve as a base for communication in English (v).

Chapter three of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005) titled "Curricular Area, School Stages, and Assessment," a section is devoted to Language Education and Art Education. Under the Language Section, the focus is given on using different forms of literature to provide context and words to improve English Language skills. Under Art Education, Four major streams namely music, dance, visual arts, and theatre have been talked about and discussed. But at both places, no mention of poetry can be found. National Curriculum Framework 2005, the biggest official document on the curriculum of school education is silent on why and how to introduce poetry to students' lives through means of classroom teaching.

Though there is no separate mention of poetry teaching in the entire National Curriculum Framework, in

English textbooks under the title "Notes for the Teacher" and "To the Teacher" small references to poetry teaching in the form of a piece of advice can be found.

In Class IX Beehive English Textbook under the section "Note for the Teacher," we find:

We need not talk about the poet or the background to the poem unless the poem seems to demand it. Nor should we attempt to exhaust all the possibilities of a poem; we should encourage the students to begin to see some of the possibilities. They should be guided to apprehend the poem through the visual, the auditory, the tactile, the intellectual, or the emotional channels, and to understand the suggestiveness of the images (1).

In Class X Textbook First Flight under the section "To the Teacher," we can see:

While dealing with poems, let children understand and enjoy the theme and the language by reading a poem with close attention, more than once, silently or along with the teacher or a partner. Where some information has been provided about the poet or the background to the poem, this should not stand in the way of the learner accessing the poem directly and attempting to make sense of it (v- vi).

Analyzing the abovementioned references, one can understand that the aim of poetry teaching as advised in the above textbooks is as follows: The makers of the textbook advocate that the students should enjoy the poems and explore the possibility of the different meanings of the poems. Students should be encouraged to access and comprehend the poem on their own through different intellectual, emotional and visual, auditory ways. On the one hand, there is advocacy for students' self-sufficiency in enjoying and comprehending the poem for its meaning and themes, and suggestiveness but on the other hand, one finds that supplementary reading books that are prescribed for students with the purpose to inculcate the habit of self-reading do not include any poems. And if students are not given chance to engage with the poem on their own, how can they develop a liking and relationship with poetry.

To sum up, there is no clear and detailed official stand provided by the biggest official curriculum framework (NCF 2005) on why to teach literature in general and poetry in particular. Teaching literature has just been assumed as a means to develop the English language. Though, under the section "Notes for the Teacher" of English Textbooks, small excerpts of advice can be found. These small excerpts, just the length of a small paragraph are not at all sufficient/enough to provide a proper framework for poetry teaching. Despite that, if we analyze them, we can find that they emphasize developing a relationship of enjoyment and sense of possibility, and self-sufficiency with poetry and students. But when there was a real opportunity to expose students to different types of the literary genre through supplementary reading texts/books, the genre of poetry has not been given any place.

So the result is that a large number of students grow up not liking, ignoring, or distancing themselves from poetry. Reflecting on the cause, in the article "Official School Poetry in Indian Textbooks: A Critical View," Modi finds two major problems. The first one pertains to the selection of poems, and the second one is related to the treatment of these poems as texts (1).

Regarding the selection of poems, Modi observes that the poems that are prescribed in the syllabus are generally classical. To quote him "A substantial number of poems make it to textbooks only because they enjoy a canonical status within the tradition of English literature. They are poems written by great writers that textbook writers believe that children should be aware of" (1). Thomas, in his essay entitled "Child Poets and the Poetry of the Playground," calls these types of canonical poetry "official school poetry" which is "the dominant mode of children's poetry in the school, the kind of poetry written by adults and taught to children in the classroom"(152).

Modi further argues that though there is nothing wrong in introducing students to classical poems if they are aligned with the need and interests of the students, the awareness is also needed that just because it is canonical poetry does not mean children will connect to it as most of this canonical poetry is written by adults for adults. And there can be a sharp difference between "what adults believe to be good for children, and what children enjoy" (1).

Now let us see, how these poetry texts are taught in the classroom. In our educational setup, poetry is majorly considered a medium to develop language skills (Mittal [2014], Ilankumaran and Deepa [2018]) and analytic skills to pass the examination (Rumbold, Simreck[2016]). So, linguistic and cognitive goals rule the aim of poetry teaching in the classroom. Francis in her thesis Teaching Poetry at Tertiary Level: The Oblique Method points out the exam-driven poetry teaching system where what is asked in examination is what is taught in the poetry classroom.

To a vast majority of average learners, poetry is an examination subject. It is taught and learned from the point of view of examination...[The]...glossing of every word, the marking of passages for annotations, and the taking down of hints for writing essays are the main features of poetry classes. There is no discussion or asking of questions, if at all questions are asked, they are only testing questions, and not teaching questions (76).

Exploring poetry in the educational space, we can observe that a few major trends are dominating the teaching of poetry. First, overshadowing the distinctiveness of poetry teaching under the generalization of language and literature teaching as there is a lack of detailed framework on how and why to teach poetry. Second, the observation related to the selection of poetry

based on the RES model and it provides an example of how the poetry therapy-based model can be applied in the classroom setting. The research scholar taught this lesson (as she was a Teach for India fellow from 2018 -2020) to 15-20 girl students of standard VI, at Government Senior Secondary School, C Block, Sangam Vihar, New Delhi, under the poetry project titled "Jadoo A Alfaz".

Objective

The objective of the class was that the students will reflect and create a poem about them.

Warm-up Activity

The session started with an ice breaker activity in which the students were asked to introduce themselves by telling their name along with an adjective starting with their name's alphabet. One was modeled out for them. For example, My name is Shruti and my adjective is sensitive So, the introduction would look like: Hi! I am sensitive Shruti.

Starting the class with an icebreaker activity is a good way to start the class as it opens up the students and helps them to be in their comfort zone.

Receptive Stage: Introduction to the Poem

After building rapport with the students through the icebreaker activity, the poem was introduced to the class. (While choosing the poem, the need and interests of students should be kept in mind. This is the receptive part of the RES Model). The poem which was selected by the research scholar was "We are not hens' eggs" by Charles R. Brown. This poem was selected as it is linguistically accessible and aligns with the need and interests of the students. The complete poem is reproduced here:

We are not hens' eggs
 We are not hens' eggs, or bananas, or clothespins,
 to be counted off by the dozen.
 Down to the last detail, we are all different.
 Everyone has his fingerprints.
 Recognize and rejoice in that endless variety.
 The white light of the divine purpose streams down from
 heaven
 to be broken up by these human prisms
 into all the colors of the rainbow.
 Take your color in the pattern
 and be just that.
 (Brown)

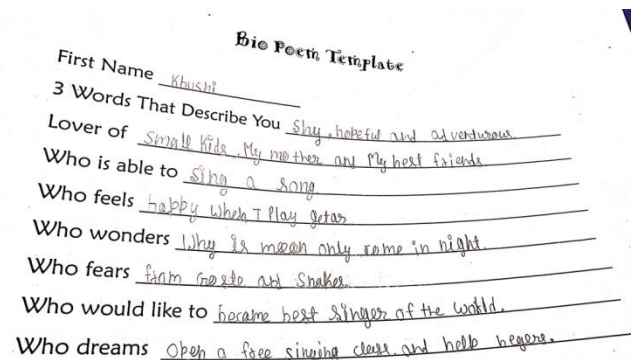
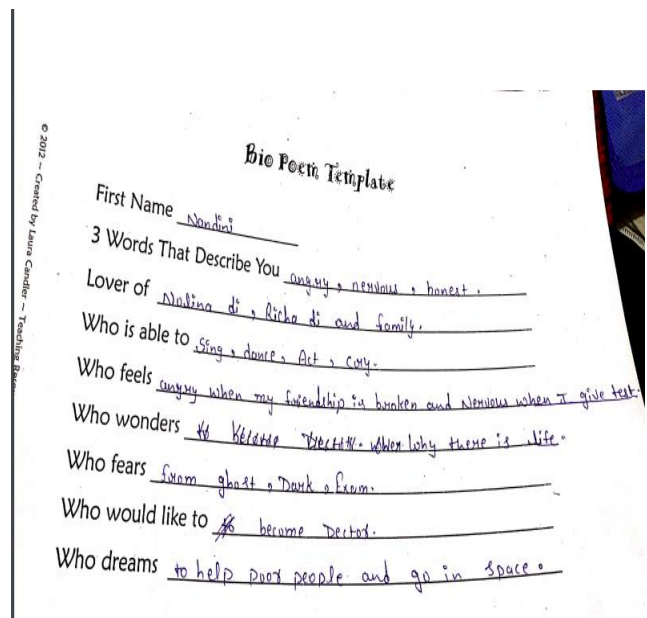
The introduction of the poem was followed by a discussion. The things which were done differently in the follow-up discussion were: instead of asking what does a poem mean, the question was asked what does it mean to you? Instead of asking what you think about the poem, the question was asked about how do you feel about the poem? Which line do you feel connected to most and why? This slight shift in the language of the question shifted the focus from the text to the students. It gave students more

chances to connect with the text at a personal and deeper level.

Expressive Stage: Write your poem

After discussing the poem students were encouraged to express themselves through the poem. For making students write, one format poem known as Bio Poem developed by Laura Candler was introduced to the students. Students wrote poetry about themselves by following the format of the Bio Poem. (This is the expressive component of the RES model where space is created for written expression through the use of pre-structured stems, formats, prompts). The pre-structured format helped the students to write without any hesitation. The Students who could never believe that they could write poetry ended up writing poetry with the help of this format.

Some of the students writing samples are attached below:



Symbolic Stage: Share it Out Loud

Finally, the lesson ended with students sharing their poetry with the class. This was followed by a reflection circle around these questions:

How did they feel after sharing their poem? Was it easy or difficult to write a poem? What are the two things you learned new about yourself? Describe one Aha moment of today? (This includes the symbolic aspect of the RES model). This step helped the students to feel connected with the entire class. The students who were initially shying from sharing, after seeing the other students expressing their hearts out, also started opening up. The process of sharing about themselves helped them to shed their inhibition of right and wrong. Sharing about oneself and knowing about one's friends in the classroom hooked them throughout the process. After the class got over, there was a smile on the faces, brightness in the eyes of the students.

From this sample poetry lesson plan, the following conclusions can be arrived at: It is possible to integrate the Poetry Therapy model into poetry teaching in the context of the Indian classroom. RES model provides the scope for making poetry teaching fun and interesting through a well-developed framework that helps the students to connect with poetry at a personal and deeper level. Its three-stage model also provides a platform to develop all the linguistic skills namely: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Along with its linguistic aim, it also creates space for approaching poetry more holistically. It helps students to engage with poetry as a subject of life rather than just as a subject of examination.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, poetry is an integral part of Indian culture. I understood and utilized it properly it has immense potential to help students to discover the inner self and navigate the outer world. School is the first place where depending on exposure and orientation toward poetry, students will start liking or disliking poetry. So, there is a dire need to create the proper space for poetry in the Indian classroom. A deep focus is required on all three levels of poetry teaching: why to teach poetry, what to teach in poetry, and how to teach poetry. Rather than just focusing on poetry as a medium to develop the English language, it should be approached more holistically. The expertise and wisdom of the field of poetry therapy can provide a new lens to look at poetry teaching. RES poetry therapy model of Nicholas Mazza is one such example. If explored and integrated with poetry teaching as shown through the above teaching sample, along with linguistic aim, it can also create space for approaching poetry more holistically.

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How to cite this article?

Shruti Mishra¹, Geetha Yadav² "Nicholas Mazza's RES Poetry Therapy Model: An Innovative Method to Teach Poetry in the Context of Indian Schools", *International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)* 3(1), PP: 47-53, 2021, DOI: 10.22247/ijtell/2022/4211