

Poetry Sessions – Notes for facilitators

Based on a session run by Bill Foster at ACO conference

Setting it up

Two weeks before this first session I send the GPRs a flyer. This gives a justification for using poetry, pointing to the ways in which poetry may help. The flyer describes the two sessions. The first session uses poems I have selected (these are attached to the flyer). The second session uses poems selected by the GPRs. The flyer makes suggestions as to how to approach the poems and contains some ideas as to how to choose a poem and also has suggestions for poetry sources (anthologies and web-sites)

Working with facilitator-selected poems first enables the GPRs to get into the method making it easier for the GPRs to select and present the poems they choose in the second session.

Introduction

Setting the session up

You might wish to re-iterate some of the justification given in the flyer:

Asking participants about their previous experiences of poetry may reveal who are the enthusiasts and who are the sceptics. Some will have pre-read the poems, others may not have got round to it (have spare copies for those who have forgotten to bring them!)

Explain the format:

There is no right or wrong way to read or listen to a poem

Poems are open to different interpretations and meanings

These sessions will not be about literary criticism and no prior knowledge is needed

What I want to hear is your individual response and to open up a discussion

Start by looking at the poem. Read it to yourself and ask yourself some of these questions (about 2 minutes for this):

- What is it about? Whose voice are you hearing?
- What appeals to me about this poem
- What feelings does it evoke in you?
- What images or memories does it evoke?
- What is the poet saying?
- What is the meaning of the poem?
- What do you like about it? Focus on the detail of words / phrases
- Use your imagination if some parts are obscure
- Is there a phrase or image that really hits home
- Does this poem remind me of how I feel now or how I used to feel?
- Do the ideas of the poem resonate with me?
- Is there anything in the poem that helps me to see something in a new light?

One of us will then read it out aloud. (No compulsion)

You might just want to listen at this stage (without looking at the poem).

Then we will take a short pause to consider what you have heard.

After this we will then discuss our thoughts and feelings about the poem.

Are there any concerns or questions at this stage?

Discussion of the poems

After the reading and a short pause, group members are encouraged to discuss their own reactions to the poem.

Watch the participants for non-verbal cues

Asking participants to clarify or expand, especially if their comments are ambiguous

Keep the discussion focus on the poem

Be curious if new ideas and interpretations appear

Discourage literary criticism. Be watchful re individual participation. Encourage and invite

Opening prompts:

- What is this poem about? (getting started)
- What did this poem mean to you? (exploring metaphor use / imagination)
- What image does this conjure up for you?
- What feelings do these images generate in you?
- What does this do for you? (exploring emotional response)
- What feelings or emotions does this poem evoke in you? (ditto)
- What emotions are expressed in the poem? How does it do this?
- What metaphors are used?
- What did you like or enjoy about the poem? (to highlight poetry for enjoyment)
- What does this remind you of? (to prompt discussion of learner's experiences)
- Any echoes from your own experience? (creating links to relevance)

Eliciting comments:

- You say..... what section of the poem gave you that impression?
- You found those words confusing.... what could they mean?
- What does anyone else think about that?
- You found the metaphor of... effective, why was that?
- What do you think is the significance of the ... metaphor?

- Which words or phrases in the poem are most significant in giving direction or meaning?

Encourage reflection:

- I was wondering what is was in the poem that made you feel so strongly

Look at application of gained knowledge/insight:

- So, if you were in that situation again, would you do things differently?
- How would this change your approach to... in the future?
- How does this relate to interactions between doctors and patients

Summarising the learning:

- This may be appropriate, at the end of one poem, or at the end of the session
- Or it might be unnecessary or time consuming. What is “learnt” may be hard to distil at this stage, and, in any case, will be highly individual
- Metaphor often appears in the patient narratives
- Attention to individual words and phrases in consultations can lead to clearer insights into their thoughts, feelings and emotional states

Timing: 12 mins per poem = 5 in 60 min

Acknowledgement:

An important source of ideas for the development of these sessions was:

Powley E and Higson R (2005) *The Arts in Medical Education – A practical guide*. Radcliffe Publishing: Oxford.

Titles of facilitator chosen poems

“Health Check” by Penny Feinstein

“Morning Song” by Sylvia Plath

“Homecoming” by Wislawa Szymborska

“The Door” by Miroslav Holub

“Walking Away – for Sean” by C. Day Lewis

“Postscript” by Seamus Heaney

Other sources appear in the flyer to the registrars. A lot of the fun of poetry based education lies in finding poems that you enjoy and that you think will trigger interesting discussions between your learners.

Happy hunting!

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