

Orality and the Poetics of Curriculum

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The Milky Way

In my mother's bedroom, soft green wallpaper fronds
order a forest shade of warm, hushed by my parents' nightly
dreaming.

Early fall frost cools the house, not frozen enough for coal
to be lit in the elephant furnace

silent in the cellar.

My father is in town at a seed plant meeting, leaving
my mother and me alone. The small shuttered
reading lamp burns above the pillows softly
as it does every night to soothe us into sleeping.

I've curled my arms to lock the nightgown below
the knees. My mother unbuttons her beige slacks, steps
out and kicks them to the chair. Her arms slide
from her threadbare cotton blouse, breasts falling open.

She adds her brassiere to the pile, slips on a long shirt, scoops
the clothes into the rocker by the old metal crib.
Her round smooth body brushes against flannel stretched
over her hips, her hands following last night's wrinkles.

Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies
Volume 1 Number 2 Fall 2003

Are you afraid of dying I ask, but she doesn't answer
sitting on the edge of the bed, brushing her hair.
Her eyes look past the hallway to the top of the stairs
as she listens

settling sounds of the house.

I'm not, she says finally, because I've seen where dying goes
into the light and warm, a pathway to brilliance.
She points to the pale plaster ceiling, reaching her hands
for what I think must be the Milky Way.

I can hear in her voice that this is true and I return
to my bed, crawling beneath the goose down
wondering if this quiet darkness
is a doorway to the sky, the crescent moon

spilt stars hum
with the glow of my mother's reading lamp
and the warmth of her body
falling over the house

like feathers.

(Luce-Kapler, 2003, pp. 3-4)

Hear the author read [The Milky Way](#)

This poem from my collection, *The Gardens Where She Dreams*, is one that people often tell me is their favourite, and I have wondered why this might be so. There are many familiar images at work here of course—the mother as the origin of knowledge; the mother as nurturer. But threaded through these images is a recollection of an intimate event. An event of quiet conversation—a simple question and a simple answer. Yet such moments are ones that touch the heart of what it means to be human and that is what I believe poetry can do. Jane Hirshfield (1997) notes that words are “vessels of consciousness.” And I would say that poems give a shape and a hue to that vessel. When I read “The Milky Way” to an audience I feel that we are for a moment gathered in that gently lit room, the quiet darkness of the countryside creating expectancy as we ponder important questions within the membrane of the moment.

I seldom experienced this quality of poetry in school. In fact, it took me some years after school before I ventured into poetry in a sustained and engaged way. I really came to it through being in a community of poets who wrote, met and read their work aloud, performing it at any opportunity. Poems leapt off the page and into our midst without searching for meanings, parsing lines, or identifying rhythm structures.

When I hear teacher candidates express fears around teaching poetry, I understand because many of them have come from similar schooling structures to mine; that is, an emphasis on the silent text within the pages of anthologies followed by dissecting questions.

Billy Collins, former poet laureate of the United States, was concerned about what often happens to poetry in school. In response, he initiated the development of a website called Poetry 180: A Poem a Day for American High Schools. "Poems," he says, "can inspire and make us think about what it means to be a member of the human race. By just spending a few minutes reading a poem each day, new worlds can be revealed" (<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180>, downloaded 5/19/03). Here's his poem on that website entitled "Introduction to Poetry."

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

(<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180>, downloaded 5/19/03)

I have written before about the importance of poetry in school and about the interrelationship of rhythm with image and word, but this time I want to go past the text, past the writing of the poem, or the reading of it on the page to consider the oral origins of poetry. By considering this history, I want to argue that poetry, beyond being an engagement with literature,

can offer our students a more powerful way to think and understand; and that by marginalizing the gifts of poetic orality, we may be limiting the possibilities for learning in our classrooms.

A Brief History of Orality

I begin with Mnemosyne, one of the earliest of the Greek goddesses, the mother of the Muses, and thus the progenitor of poetry.

First the story: It is told that before Hera became Zeus's wife, the god took the form of a shepherd and for nine nights consorted with Mnemosyne, whose domain was in the hills of Eleuther. From this coupling, Mnemosyne gave birth to nine daughters, who are known as the Muses. This is about all that has been told of Mnemosyne, for there are no tales recording other deeds. Yet she owns all tales, and these could not exist without her power, since each narrating word would vanish without leaving a trace as soon as it appears if Memory, Mnemosyne, did not preserve them (<http://homepage.mac.com/cparada/GML/Mnemosyne.html>, downloaded 5/19/03). Through Mnemosyne, Hirshfield writes, "words first learned to transcend time" (Hirshfield, p. 176). It is interesting, I think, that the mother of language and remembrance has so few words written about her, and yet she hovers along the threads of memory. While we may not know her name, we certainly know her influence as A.S. Byatt acknowledges when she invokes Mnemosyne in her novel, *Possession*:

Help me Mnemosyne, thou Titaness
Thou ancient one, daughter of Heaven and Earth,
Mother of the Muses, who inhabit not
In flowery mount or crystal spring, but in
The dark and confin'd cavern of the skull—
O Memory, who holds the thread that links
My modern mind to those of ancient days.

(1990, p. 293)

Poetry reaches back to the structures of memory before words were written down. John Steffler writes: Poems are "carried in our memory like a small stone in the pocket" (1995, p. 51). When we listen to poetry, its sound comes into our bodies, and its ancient markers nestle into our minds: A stitch in time saves nine. Thirty days hath September, April, June and November. One of my poems thinks about this embodiment of memory.

Shards Of Memory

In Prague a leaning bone church remembers
victims of the Black Plague
flesh fallen from human architecture

shin bones dangle from pelvis petals
a chandelier that sheds no light on death

ropes of skull and tibia loop across ceilings
sway in macabre gaiety
stirred by wind of memory

ashes and words scatter
through undulating time

other bones hide beneath the earth
laid random in a white casket
two ribs, three fingers

charred remains of a chimney fire
that left only his teeth as identity

two years in elementary school
he persisted with notes of affection
that I in shame burned and buried

how will we remember the dead
at any moment they wait to appear

in the curve of shoulder, at the smudge of smoke
across a late summer sky
as we wait for the call

inside the bone church I see trails
of his scorched heart

burning in the wood stove
his words of sixth grade love
already curling into his epitaph

(Luce-Kapler, 2003, pp. 17-18)
Hear the author read [Shards of Memory](#)

We remember with bones—the bones of our bodies, the bones of our language, those mnemonic creatures. Before the development of writing, there was a particular quality to the words that needed to be remembered and that we still find in language today. One of those qualities is repetition within variation often accomplished through meter and rhyme. (30 days hath September, April, June, and November). And through other structures like lists or patterns of words (once upon a time) or alliteration (She sells seashells . . .) or paratactic structures—that is, using “and” rather than subordinate clauses. Think about a pledge or prayer that you know well such as the Lord’s Prayer and see if those structures are not paratactic relying on “and, and, and.”

These qualities are the small markers that we can easily discover, but there are more complex structures of remembrance. Referring to the work of Milman Parry, Jane Hirshfield writes that, “What the research has made visible is this: if the threads of memory are spun of the sounds and structures of individual lines, physical embodiment and narrative are the loom on which the epic’s astonishing garment is woven” (p. 181). In the 1920s, Parry realized that early poetry, the poetry of Homer and the Greeks, was shaped by the requirements of the hexameter line, the structure of oral composition. Working with such a pattern, the teller would stitch her or his tale appropriately for the occasion and the audience.

Eric Havelock has described the Homeric poems as encyclopedias of the Greek world. “Geography, genealogies, laws; descriptions of how a ship is launched or brought into harbor; accounts of how to behave at a banquet, how not to behave toward the daughter of a priest—all were preserved across both time and distance in the epic’s hexameter lines” (Hirshfield, p. 183).

The structures that enable such remembrance depend on acoustic rhythm, which Havelock (1986a) suggests is a component of our nervous system’s reflexes, a pleasurable biological force reinforced through our musical chants, melodies, and dances. Susanne Langer (1953/1967) supports this perspective when she explains that the rhythm of language is a “mysterious trait that probably bespeaks biological unities of thought and feeling” (p. 258) and that the rhythms of life, organic, emotional and mental, compose a dynamic pattern of feeling.

Successful retention in memory is built by such rhythmic repetition. Think about the child who requests the retelling of a story over and over again in her desire to remember it and to retell it herself, relishing the experience. Mere repetition of content, however, is not enough in an oral culture to create memorable structures. The key lies in the acoustically

identical sound patterns which can alter their content to express diverse meanings. Early humans, Havelock proposes, converted thought into rhythmic talk where the recurring cadences were created through the acoustic value of language. The metaphors for the memory language of the Muses, Havelock writes, “dwell on its liquidity; it flows, it gushes, in a steady stream” (1986a, p. 81).

In primary orality, function and pleasure are intertwined. Content is “cast in verbal forms designed to assist the memory by conferring pleasure” (Havelock, 1986a, p. 45): a partnership of social and aesthetic purposes. Once written language emerges, the social responsibility begins to shift to the textual: a move from the acoustic to the architectural as vision takes precedence over hearing. With the move to writing, the past tense begins to intermingle with the present as actions become part of historical fact. As Havelock notes, “The verb ‘to be,’ linking a subject and its property in a timeless connection, intrudes as it never could in oralist language. This is not cinema, but still life, a writer’s portraiture” (1986a, p. 109). As rhetorical practices take hold, the privileged form becomes prose, and eventually poetry too spills into printed pages and becomes silent and studied as an aesthetic object. The knowledge of what is known is separated from the person as a cleavage opens “between theoretical discourse and the rhythmic narrative of oralism” (Havelock, 1986a, p. 114). In narrowing the role of poetry, we forget its oral power in our embodiment and its ability to develop our ways of knowing and remembering.

Oral Language and Learning

So what is my hope for poetry? I am not one to long for a golden age when communication was primarily oral—we could not go back to that time even should we wish to. We all have been born into a print world, and some have born into a digital world. We are shaped by our technologies of language and writing. Nevertheless, the traces of an oral culture still exist as do most technologies that humans have developed. But, as we pay less and less attention to orality, as we forget to teach its strategies, are we losing something that is potentially valuable and important? Are we losing an aspect of developing our minds in a powerful way? These are questions not easily answered, but I maintain that as educators we should be thinking and talking about such things rather than just watching them fade into the dust of former days.

Within our curriculum documents, oral language exists on the margins. In English, it is one strand that is half-heartedly acknowledged, leading to the belief that if a teacher asks questions and the student answers or if class presentations are planned, that will cover the oral requirement. Often, the oral nature of an assignment is not even acknowledged, and so the role of orality in our learning is not considered or developed.

When I was in school, we were regularly required to memorize poetry for recitation. And while there were some problematic aspects to that process, we did learn about rhythm and structures of remembering. We were learning something by heart—the physicality of the process written in our bodies. (30 days hath September—when did I learn that? So long ago now, I do not even remember the event although I am sure it was in elementary school. The staying power of such knowledge has long outlived other things I thought I knew.)

There are two aspects of poetry's oral nature that I think important for educators to consider: First, besides its aesthetic qualities, poetry offers verbal forms that can work with and develop our memory as I have described in considering its genesis in the oral tradition. Secondly, poetry reminds us of the relationship between words and action—the embodied nature of language.

In ancient Hebrew, the word *dabar* meant both “word” and “event.” The oral mind is where knowledge is “embedded in the recital of outward description and actions . . . It is a mind,” Hirshfield writes, “carried through time by the artful weaving of sound” (p. 185).

Havelock warns about ignoring the oral in our educational processes, suggesting that we might damage the very conceptual powers we are aiming to develop. “Oral language has this fundamental quality,” he writes.

It is realistic. It deals with the specifics of what one senses and feels. It has a habit of calling a spade a spade. It expresses the realities of our experience in down-to-earth terms. You may think this is not characteristic of rhythmic or poetic language, but this is incorrect. Take the language of the nursery rhyme: Jack fell down and broke his crown and Jill came tumbling after. (1986 b, p. 415)

He goes on to argue that we need to keep such lively, orally expressed language in close relation to the conceptual power of abstract language throughout all levels of education; otherwise, he warns, abstract language will run riot and slide into compulsive generalization. Such a practice will

create a screen that protects us from what he calls “reality” and what I call an embodied presence in the world, critical for our learning.

In our enthusiasm for a poststructural description of the discursive body and our textual subjectivity, we sometimes forget that, even before language, our bodies lived in the world and in community with other human beings. Merlin Donald, in his examination of consciousness, explains that embodiment is what grounds our consciousness, our sense of personal reality. It is through our bodies that we enjoy the rhythms of existence, those perceptual templates that express temporal relations originating in sound, feeling or sight (Donald, 2001). And it is through our bodies in relation to others that we develop our mimetic skills.

Mimesis is the body language we learn and enact in the company of others—those attitudes, gestures, postures, stances and unspoken nuances woven through our communications. Mimesis is not mindless repetition but an intentional act in a public dimension that defines us personally, socially and culturally. It is the aspect that troubles communication in a foreign context because it is often subtle and nuanced, easily escaping our specific notice.

From this reaching out and responding to the world, including vocal mimesis, language evolves, and we learn words by relating them to our experience, to the “mimetic fabric of action” (Donald, p. 288) within community. As Donald explains, “Language is a powerful means of constructing autobiographical memories, but our sense of self takes on meaning only within shared oral traditions” (p. 321).

This brings me back to Havelock’s caution that we too quickly skip over orality in our educational processes. Within an oral context, we can develop mimetic and linguistic skill along with a sense of selfhood. Poetry, with its demands for attention to rhythm is one way to linger over and encourage oral skills. It is the language of action and articulation of emotion rather than precise logic, and it is the language of the world: its events, its songs, its rhythms. In poetry, “words are the tracks left by the breath of the mind as it passes across the breath of the lungs” (Bringhurst, 2002, p. 161). Such “acts of rhythmic attention comprise a syntax for knowing the world” (Lee, 2002, p. 20).

Turning to a specific poem is a concrete way of considering the possibilities of poetry, such as this one by William Carlos Williams entitled “This is Just to Say.”

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

(1917/1985, p. 74)

Williams is known for his deceptively simple and imagistic poems that precisely describe physicality and action. Every time I read this piece, I can envisage a firm, cold plum and taste its sweet juice. The poem runs like a short movie in my head as I have an image of a kitchen, a bowl of plums in the icebox, someone quietly raiding that icebox, and the sense of someone else still asleep somewhere in the house. The concrete description suggests much about the relationship between the two people merely through the act of one individual eating the plums. The specificity of place and action enable me to be present and to consider the nature of relationship and love, moving into a more abstract realm all the while grounded in a specific instance. Imagine if Williams had written “a man refuses to take a mature approach in his relationships with women and continues to regard them as maternal substitutes.” I am unable to think much beyond that statement for the ground has been taken away and the words lack the careful rhythm of the poem—that quiet, hesitant, and yet mischievous voice asking for forgiveness.

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

We sense the emotional hue of those words within a particular time and space. It is in this poem, then, and in many others, where we may start to hear the lessons for curriculum.

Orality and the Poetics of Curriculum

When I think about the current state of curriculum as it is commonly understood in schools, the most telling examples for me are the students that I teach in their final year of education. Nowhere else are the effects of such a curriculum more evident. Mingled with their plans and hopes for teaching English, are bits and pieces of knowledge and practices that they want to organize in preparation for imparting these ideas to their students. Often it is difficult to convince them that it is the experience of deep engagement with language and rhythm and text that is significant in their classes.

Since 1998, I have been running small writing research groups for teacher candidates, and it is in these contexts where I hear beneath the surface of that encrusted layer of schooling. In these groups, each individual writes about an experience through three different forms: narrative, poetry, and hypertext. Perhaps not surprisingly, the form that generally elicits the most emotion is poetry. As an example of such a response, I consider a piece from one of the participants, Rhonda, who wrote the following as a way of offering feedback to me:

I am a writer. At least in theory. Through my vast amounts of reading and university English classes, I've consumed many forms of writing. I know nouns, nuances, assonances, subject, predicate, past participle, postmodernism, pathetic fallacy, foreshadowing, critical analysis, cultural appropriation, anapestic tetrameter and alliteration. I'm so clever. I've got concepts in my head so wonderful that I can't get them down on paper. Oh yes, I have a real aptitude for writing. A steady flow of great things to say in beautiful language. Too bad my pen doesn't agree. One day it will explode and then what a mess it will be. Ink and bad rhymes everywhere to see. By the way, did I mention that I'd rather write on a computer? Some would say that means I can't be a true writer. Real writers only use pens. Computers distance you from your subject. But perhaps that's where I'm most comfortable. That way criticism won't matter and I can shut down my feeble attempts with just a click of a button. I bet Beethoven wishes that he had a computer. Like me, he could edit, re-arrange lines and use a program that substitutes one note for another. Changes would be instantaneous, and no evidence would ever be left behind of any prior error. Who needs to know that the Third was originally dedicated to Napoleon anyway? Marginalia is only useful for Ninth century monks. But back to my enormous talent (or shall we say my "stunning potential"?) It's rather ironic that with all the beautiful/poetic/tragic/breathtaking/revelational ideas clogging up my head, the only thing I can write about is my inability to get it OUT.

I want to be a poet

I want to be a writer

I want to write novels

I want to be a great Canadian storyteller.

I need to make others feel as I've been made to feel. Gentle crafting hands reach out, grasp my mind and pull me into an unfamiliar world found between welcoming pages. To be that person, that leaf, or a still, silent moment of a salt mine. Take a picture, I will see; create a picture well and I will be there, an invisible presence transformed, made new and suddenly aware for the first time. Extending my hand in front of me, I see my veins replaced by light green liquid, my fingers are the tips of a spirea leaf, and a cold drop sits on my heart. I am a six-year-old boy awakening towards life. I share his awe, his wonder, his peace. We reach out almost-realization at the same instant. My real mind opens and allows these words to drip onto the page.

Rhonda's response begins with a rant as she lists the abstractions and theories that have characterized her study of English. She describes her need to be correct and the belief there is no room for mistakes. Since she feels she must project an image of being capable and composed, she prefers to write on the computer where a click of a key can erase the messiness and the risk of writing.

Then there is a sudden break in her text. The lines shift as a poetic form emerges. We hear some wishes and dreams; the language becomes more rhythmic and concrete as the cadence slows. The reader starts to feel some relationship to the writer and Rhonda, in turn, recognizes her relationship to others and to nature. She tells us that her “real mind opens and allows these words to drip onto the page”: a very concrete and embodied image. By the end of the piece, I have a sense of Rhonda as a struggling writer and an emerging teacher in ways that would not be possible through the earlier abstract listings.

At the beginning of a semester, my well-schooled students usually offer me their list of English periods, genres, and theories that they have studied in the hopes we will discuss how such knowledge will inform their teaching. I do not hear about real minds opening and words dripping onto pages.

My students go to teach in a world where curriculum focuses on testing, textbooks, and time management. It is about as far from poetics as you can get. To think about a poetics of curriculum, we have to invite the lovely concrete shapes, the evocative rhythms, and the close attention of poetry into our teaching and learning. Poetry reminds us of how rhythmic attention brings us into the moment, so we can see more clearly where we are and what lies before us before we go soaring off into abstractions. We need to remember that we are speakers and storytellers in a community that must hear each other speak, chant and sing as we move our bodies. We listen to and learn from each other engaged in the pleasures of embodied action.

Like poetry, curriculum is stronger when it does not exist only on the page. The oral character of poetry reminds us of the power of the functional and the aesthetic. Sadly, most of our curriculum focuses on function and loses the aesthetic, and so we lose the opportunity to engage our students in the ethical lessons of beauty. In her argument that beauty teaches us to live ethically, Elaine Scarry recounts a lecture by Iris Murdoch, “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts.” Murdoch explains that anything that moves us toward unselfishness is connected with virtue. This happens most often, she suggests, in the presence of beauty. She describes a kestrel hovering and how such a sight brings about an ‘unselfing.’ “It causes a cluster of feelings that normally promote the self . . . to fall away. It is not just that she becomes ‘self-forgetful’ but that some more capacious mental act is possible” (Scarry, 1999, p. 113).

To notice such beauty, to have room for goodness, suggests the need for time and, in our hurry to offer students ever more quantities of knowledge, time seems forever running out. It would seem impossible to achieve the necessary space.

Yet there are things afoot that could make a difference. In *The Globe and Mail* (September 27, 2003), there was an article entitled "Slow Schooling." The discussion about such schooling began last year with the publication of a piece in *Phi Delta Kappan* by educator Maurice Holt who was searching for a metaphor that would interrupt the "drill and kill" philosophy. Simply put, children in a slow schooling environment savour information, engage thoroughly and deeply with something as they learn how to learn and understand. This process does not sound difficult; however, finding examples where such a curriculum unfolds is not easy. The reporter of the piece turned to OISE/UT's Institute of Child Study's laboratory school as one place where schooling could indeed be called "slow." Here's an instance of such learning from Mr. Messina's grade four class in that school:

The children became entranced with the idea of light. They wanted to learn everything, absolutely everything, about it. That included minute debates about Newtonian versus wave theory physics, and they even found non-standard textbooks because, as one of his Grade 4 students sniffed, the ministry textbook described the phenomenon of light-emitting creatures without *once* using the word 'bioluminescence.'

In the end, the class spent a full year on light.

The curriculum mandates four weeks, maximum. They didn't even get to the concept of sound until the end of the year.

Mr. Messina felt incredibly guilty. Finally, a student brought him back down to Earth: 'Richard, relax,' the kid told him. 'We know how to learn.'

(Mitchell, 2003, pp. F1, F10)

I think in such a space we can find a poetics of curriculum. Like oral language and poetry, it takes us into the moment, teaches us to listen, to learn and to recall. Re-calling is a very physical act. And re-calling can remind us. Much of this poetic power comes from its history and its oral nature. "Now, as twenty-eight hundred years ago, a poet's task is to cast a convincing spell, to create in the mind of another a lasting and particular vision of human experience, whether as sweeping as Homer's

or as tightly focused as a single fragment by Sappho" (Hirshfield, p. 184). For me, I want our students to hear and to say, as well as to write poetry, and I want to move toward a poetics of curriculum, to inspire and be inspired and to think about what it means to be a "member of the human race."

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