

A Poetry Pedagogy for Teachers Reorienting Classroom Literacy Practices

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Volume 8, Number 1, 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1106388ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29726>

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Publisher(s)

University of Alberta

ISSN

2371-3771 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Loch, S. (2023). Review of [A Poetry Pedagogy for Teachers: Reorienting Classroom Literacy Practices]. *Art/Research International*, 8(1), 334–345.
<https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29726>

Article abstract

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A POETRY PEDAGOGY FOR TEACHERS: REORIENTING CLASSROOM LITERACY PRACTICES

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Abstract: This is a review of *A Poetry Pedagogy for Teachers: Reorienting Classroom Literacy Practices* by Maya Pindyck and Ruth Vinz, with Diana Liu and Ashlynn Wittchow. The authors, U.S.-based poets, educators, and arts-academics, share a crafted master class in creative thinking and poetic confidence building for teachers. They employ a strongly collaborative stance, and take readers with them on a poststructural journey by weaving together a collection of poems, scholarly literature, and resources which aim to provoke their teacher-readers to write. Readers should ready themselves with pen and paper, notebook, or computer as the many "Invitations" (writing exercises which appear at the end of each chapter and in a section of their own towards the end) will have readers sliding into poetry and seeing it in the most unexpected places.

Keywords: poetry; pedagogy; teachers; writing; poststructuralism

Poems Are Where They Must Be

Starting

“Choose a line in [the] poem that speaks to you (a line you find resonant)” (p. 30). In their book on ways to teach poetry, *A Poetry Pedagogy for Teachers: Reorienting Classroom Literacy Practices*, Maya Pindyck and Ruth Vinz (with Diana Liu and Ashlynn Wittchow, 2022), offer this line that resonates with me and provides a starting point for the review (p. xiv, ebook version):

Poems are where they must be
but I want to add . . . and where is that?

It is only a fragment of a sentence, “Poems are where they must be,” but it is formed as a line towards the bottom of the page, tucked in around subway cars, birds’ eggs, a glacier, ideas, and feelings. Poetry, as Pindyck and Vinz (2022) demonstrate, is about drawing attention to things people may otherwise miss. As a teacher, I concur that teaching poetry is complex; even for English teachers, lovers of poetry, and poets themselves: a lot depends on how you begin, how you get into the unit, whether your students can sense fear or eagerness.

Always one for eagerness, I made many “notes to self” during preparation for this review, with ideas to use in my classes in 2023. So, when an email came from the International Coalition of Girls’ Schools with links to American poet, Sarah Kay, who was presenting at one of their conferences, I clicked and followed the trail. I came to Kay’s website and remembered Pindyck and Vinz’s suggestion to seek out video clips of poets reading their work as an engaging, pedagogical tool (for extensive ideas see Part III, Resources for Teachers, pp. 187-197, by Liu and Wittchow). I found a YouTube video of Kay (2014) delivering a TED Talk entitled *Poetry Makes People Nervous*, in which she explains her reasoning—that this nervousness is because people have “been led to believe that poetry can only be written by certain types of people, for certain types of people, about very specific subjects.” Kay then continues her thesis by describing how “poetry is like pooping; if there is a poem inside you, it has to come out.” As the camera pans over the adults in the audience, the ones at the front remain stony faced, possibly waiting for the more academic version of what Kay is trying to say. Using this metaphor (replete with overt vulgarity and shock value) to describe trying to get something out from inside of you which can be fast or slow in coming, easy or painful to do, Kay makes a case for how important and necessary poets’ work is to our culture. I think of protest songs, slogans on placards, poetry read aloud at inaugurations. My eyes move to the people in the row behind who are laughing and smiling at the poop-analogy, and my mind is already heading to where I can use this clip, which Kay explains works well with

middle school boys. I get it and, bowerbird-like, will use it—it will be a great discussion prompt—but nervousness, remember that? Even though this poet got me laughing, it was her title and acknowledgement of nervousness in poetry that drew me in.

Nervousness and vulnerability have an authentic place in *A Poetry Pedagogy for Teachers*. Pindyck and Vinz (2022) are extremely honest about the challenges of drawing students (and teachers) into poetic spaces if prior injuries have occurred. Such honesty is disarming and helpful, and, through this channel, *A Poetry Pedagogy for Teachers* is an insistent fillip to encourage better poetry teaching amongst teachers of poetry. But it must be noted that the title, with its second phrase, *Reorienting Classroom Literacy Practices*, speaks to an audience already in the zone. For those seeking pedagogical petrol to burn brighter, the open, kind, and non-judgemental stance taken by Pindyck and Vinz will be supportive. The authors build a sense of companionship as the academics walk alongside teachers in mutual fellowship. One of the strategies for cultivating poetic fellowship is found in the many calm and encouraging “Invitations” which pop up throughout the book. These are suggestions for a teacher’s writing practice, as well as classroom teaching activities, which can be quickly deployed to build writerly vibes. A gap in this book, however, is how students (diverse students: students of diverse backgrounds and abilities) would, could, or have responded to “the pedagogy.” Teachers know that the curriculum they teach and the pedagogies they use must be adapted—and often explicitly differentiated—to meet the diverse needs of learners. The “Invitations” to write, suggestions and resources within the book are oriented towards classes of interested, if not highly engaged, students. I picture students with literacy skills and commands of English allowing access to a broad range of texts. Not all teachers teaching poetry teach it to students immediately capable of engaging at the level at which this book is aimed, but to encourage us as teachers of poetry and writers ourselves, *A Poetry Pedagogy for Teachers* is a helpful manual.

I pause over this line.

A manual: *by hand, of the hand, a hand book*. Poetry is much more than written and formally published. It is spoken, within visual art, video, and song, it is also in gaps and silences, it is what can not be said. Poetry is political, urgent, important, and useful. It possibly makes nothing happen, but it survives, as I learnt from W. H. Auden in, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats* (1940/2022), a poem I studied in my final year of high school:

*For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,*

*Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth. (lines 36–41)*

Gleaning ways to survive,
and seeing how other humans have done it, especially in the aftermath of the
event of global wartime,
is useful for a student.

Poetry gives us ideas.

For me, poetry was the way I got my dissertation to work. After being stuck with screeds of qualitative, longitudinal data in audio transcripts and drawings students had annotated, I found myself paralysed by not wanting to put words into people's mouths to assert that I knew what they meant. I found poetry broke the stand-off and gave me ways to talk and write differently with and about my research data so it made sense to me. It became what my English teacher, Mrs. King, promised in English lessons, via Auden, in high school:

a way of happening, a mouth

I became an English and History teacher more than 20 years ago, and, after moving in and out of secondary schools, I worked on my dissertation and moved in and out of roles in universities and academia. I am now in a hybrid space—leading a research centre in a K-to-12 school, and teaching History, mainly, and English if I'm lucky. I use poetry in my academic writing and in emails back and forth with academic friends with whom I write (Black & Loch, 2014).

I write poetry because
Intense images hurt
and time is short
and I cannot
always get to the end.

Sometimes,
when I'm working, parenting and shopping for food
I cannot stick word/s strongly enough
in a long enough string
to make a sentence,
to fish from my head,

I remember the cheese I went in to buy

But forgot the milk
Right next door.

Poetry is what I fall into when I need another way. It is what I pull together when I just cannot write a full sentence, when I am sick of my own voice needing to sound assertive and loud, when I need to go in.

And this is what brings me to holidays at the end of 2022, a year rucked by the tightness of post-COVID lockdowns and periodic nasal testing and flare ups. It has been a long year.

And here I am
where I must be
lying on the grass looking up at the sky in Sydney, Australia, and reviewing this book. As a teacher and a writer and user of poetry, I'm already an advocate so I'm open to where this book will take me
Let's go

poems are where they must be.

A Pedagogy for Teachers

December in Sydney, holiday time
some slightly cold weather
wild storms and the odd hot day
to shake out a beach towel
lay it
on the grass
in the backyard and look up

Usually I'd see
bushfires
and heatwaves with dead
spiky grass, sad dying leaves
sprinklers on the plants drinking up water
oppressive heat
but today is mild and
I can think

A teacher appreciates
 The strange coolness in December
 yawning arcs across Sydney's
 blue sky
 mauve jacaranda
 petals holding bees
 Made it to the end! December!
 to do what all teachers
 do in holidays.

Something for myself

 poetry and space

Poetry

For teachers short on time, teachers preparing for poetry units in the new year, for those wanting to expand their poetry teaching practice and to reconnect with times in their own lives when poetry mattered, this is both a practical and theoretical book; one bursting with creative, useable ideas to enrich poetry lessons. The “Invitations” concluding each chapter and collected at the end of the book (pp. 177–186), are nourishing for the teacher and do a good job at nudging one to write. I recommend the “Preface” as a thoughtful essay on engagements, entanglements, and estrangements to/with/from poetry. Collage-based, mixed-media artworks using found items by Pindyck are shared throughout the chapter as another way of experiencing poetry. I also recommend the beautifully titled, “Credits” (pp. ix-xii), evoking a list of credits rolling over the screen at the end of a movie. These credits are the list of poems referenced in the book ahead. Forty-eight go-to texts spanning different places and poets.

Right there, using the book, you have a lesson. My lesson planning brain whirs up —

Select a few sentences or a whole paragraph from the Preface and display it on the board on a Powerpoint slide which says something to the teacher s/he can't shake off.

Invite students to select a poem from the list of 48. Source the poem using the internet.

Read it. Create a collage in response. Let the lines from the Preface hover in the classroom as students talk about their poem and collage, encourage connections to be made with what's on the board.

What does the word "credit" or "credits" mean? Write a poem which can roll up over the screen.

What's your current favourite show, movie or series. Think of something bespoke, obscure, personal. Write the title on a card. Walk around the classroom and find someone who hasn't heard of it. Give it to them and get one from someone else. Knowing nothing of the show, let a poem tumble from the title.

What's something you did in the holidays? Distill it to a verb. Tumble, swim, float, drive, walk, climb, fly. Write a poem.

Share your poems.

Invite discussion. About poetry.

What about you? In a book written for teachers, let's ask about you so that you locate your connection to poetry and find a place in the text.

Do you teach poetry?

Know someone who does?

Remember times you have?

Does it make you nervous?

Do you like it, love it, want it? Tolerate, use, stay away?

These positions are all valid reading stances for *A Poetry Pedagogy for Teachers* (Pindyck and Vinz, 2022), and connect with Sarah Kay's (2014) overt declaration of poetry making people nervous. I suggest their openness to the difficulties of poetry is an effective way to begin, and poetry teachers should consider beginning this way in their lessons. "For the teachers"—to whom this book is dedicated—poetry is just as emotive and complex, even if we are the ones who have journeyed on and now teach it. Many will find it a relief to begin with reflective acknowledgement of how difficult and foreign many find the study of poetry to be. I am struck by the authors' care in this acknowledgement. They are highly conscious of, and sensitive to, the varying journeys teachers may have taken towards becoming a teacher of poetry for another generation of students. They are also conscious of contributing to a way of doing better. Gentle and respectful, Pindyck and Vinz (2022) establish their goal to "articulate a geometries of attention" which "has the potential to reorient classroom literacy practices in order to

encourage more imaginative and expansive encounters with poetry and foster a love for poetry” (p. xvi). For teachers with students who will benefit from creative space around poetry (and this must be all of us),

A Poetry Pedagogy for Teachers

pushes

every which way

to find that space and take teachers into it.

Space

A poststructural approach creates space for the teacher such as in the tumbling lesson-planning I brainstormed above. Like my blue Sydney sky with a cool December day, remembering that December in Sydney is typically hot and humid, I am in new territory, and it provokes response. Pindyck and Vinz’s reference to snow,—with a quote from poet Wallace Stevens, in his letter to a friend—“people ought to like poetry the way a child likes snow” (p. xiii), got me thinking.

I don’t think much about snow at all; I’m an Antipodean—without snow angels,
snow days and flakes.

I think about sky, bird calls, and climate.

So, now we’re journeying together, are we ready to define a poem? What is it to
you?

I’ve crafted a suggestion from Pindyck and Vinz’s lines (p. 27, p. 34, p. 183) to
model a way the text itself, or any text, can be used:

Poetry is
a way
of telling
multiple stories
versions
of ourselves
through smallnesses
prose or poetry, or both
together

And I tumble on

This book
creates space

referencing lost
ownership and voices fused

It got me to think

What does it mean to read a poem, to let it whisper-teach you?
Linger and give in to the poem

Take time to notice, question, reread in ways
that are satisfying
to you
be with the poem
and the poet in this moment
what feelings or experiences linger

Now, close your eyes

Let your mind's eye make the next move

Can you sense the space Pindyck and Vinz (2022) are seeking to open up? A reference is made to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), poststructuralists, suggesting, “just have an idea . . . short term ideas” (p. xiv) and provide a “challenge . . . to enter the invention of a poem and not attempt to make it too familiar by overinterpretation” (p. 7). Using the notion of rhizome, picture what “grows laterally, sprouting unexpected offshoots” (p. 27).

You could write a poem about that.

A rhizome . . .

Poststructuralism advocates for multiple perspectives which, surely, poetry can do so well—to “enable us to imaginatively enter another body without claiming to speak ‘for’ or ‘represent’ that body” (Pindyck & Vinz, 2022, p. 25). The curiosity and questioning of poststructuralism sits well with young people as poetry learners. From page 25, quoted at length for its beauty:

Attention to multiplicities can also be a way of attending to our multiple influences, autobiographical or not. We contain multiple histories, journeys, languages, loves – and poetry can tap into those intimate tracks and traces. We might not be able to explain why we are drawn to the Arabic language, to hip-

hop, to folk songs, and to klezmer music. We do know, though, that there is a place for our hybrid mashups in poetry. Take this poem . . .

In Part I (the bulk of the book), Pindyck and Vinz (2022) use a multitude of voices to explore the rhizomes of poetry: they use I, my, we, us. You are never sure who is writing, unless they are writing together as “us”. This draws out a key thread of the book, the use of poststructural tools and sensibilities to promote understanding in “enticing and sometimes ungraspable ways” (p. xiv). The chapter headings themselves point to ways poststructuralist ideas guide the reader’s thinking:

Speaker, Writer and Reader as Multiplicities
 The Quiet and Not-So-Quiet in Poems
 Tensions and Constraints
 Care for the More-Than-Human
 Working at the Edges and Peripheries

This leads to another lesson plan idea: Take a chapter heading, write a poem.

Why does it matter for teachers to be writers, even poets? Why is it significant for teachers to engage with the invitation to read this book and enter the poetic space?

Using the idea of taking “an already-written page” (Pindyck & Vinz, p. 110), I use the ideas of voice, sound, and quiet, “The Quiet and Not-So-Quiet in Poems” (Chapter 5), to prepare for making noise. Although there are many who get cut on poetry’s sharp edges or burned by its steam, unless poetic bases continue to expand—as they do with lyrics, song, beats, protest—students will miss out on experiencing poetry as a workable potential for what they want, and need, to say:

Raise your voice
 Find noise in your silences
 Because better poetry pedagogies
 When you cause a ruckus and step aside
 are urgent
 important
 political

Ask the real questions:
 why can’t we slow down,
 slow down enough, to
 read something twice

be curious and
ask someone else, someone different to us,
what they think?

Why might a person be tempted to imagine golden birds
and overlook the blackbirds
that walk among us?
I don't know
but thanks for asking.
There's more to learn
and learning makes noise
I wonder
can poetry help us heal by being where we need it to be?
I wonder
as allies, encouraging student-voice,
how can teachers 'pass the mic'? (Bourne & Levy, 2021)

Closing

Where to begin? With poetry, I am now confident to say, endings and beginnings are not required. I close with two of Vinz's *Invitations* to write: "Endings are sometimes beginnings, so you are the author of these *Invitations* from now on" (see p. 186), and "Take a few minutes to dive in, fiddle with a draft of a poem you are working on, not to finishing, but into more drafting" (p. 185).

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