Imagine this: thousands of young people in the 'exam school contest. Imagine your student on a national stage, the audience holding its breath, willing him or her to be wonderful, loving the poetry, celebrating these remarkable achievements by young people, and then the rapturous applause. Imagine meeting poets Andrew Motion, Jean Sprackland, Daljit Nagra, Owen Sheers, Jacob Sam-La Rose, Patience Agbabi, and hearing Roger McGough introduce your student recite their poem on BBC Radio 4’s Poetry Please.

Poetry By Heart
This is not fantasy: it’s Poetry By Heart, the two-year old national poetry recitation competition for pupils in England aged 14-18. It is an educational initiative of The Poetry Archive, developed in association with The Full English, and supported in different ways by Oxford University Press, BBC Radio 4’s Poetry Please, the National Association of Writers in Education, Writing West Midlands, The Poetry Society and Homerton College Cambridge.

Just for independent schools? No. 76% of registered schools are state schools, 44% are academies, the 2013 winner was from a Sixth Form College, the 2014 winner was from an LEA maintained comprehensive school.

Just for Year 12/13 pupils? No. 28% of the 2014 national finalists were in Year 10, and two of those were placed 2nd and 3rd nationally.

So far, so good – but if there is one thing we have learned it is this: that many if not most teachers in England have no personal experience of memorising and reciting poems. We suspect it might be different in Scotland with Burns Night recitations and in Wales with its Eisteddfodd traditions, and we know it is different in Ireland, but in England it is a performance art we are having to re-learn in order to revive it. The question is, why bother?

Owning poems in the heart
The short answer is that The Poetry Archive exists to help people enjoy poetry, and especially through the powerful auditory experience of hearing a poet read their work. The Archive is the premier online collection of recordings of English language poets from all over the world reading their own work – and contemporary poets reading the work of ‘classic’ poets who lived before electronic recording technologies existed.

Poets have long known the power of learning poems by heart: Ted Hughes writes about it in his foreword to the hugely popular schools anthology, The School Bag, edited with Seamus Heaney. Seamus Heaney argued as recently as March 2013 that memorising poetry was an important way of developing a ‘cultural ear’ that could not start soon enough. The Poetry Archive developed the Poetry By Heart competition to help young people encounter poems not as objects for metalinguistic dissection and examination performativity but to be owned in the heart and shared in embodied moments of thoughtful speaking and pin-dropped listening.

But still, what does it do? That is the question we didn’t... still don’t – have a formulated answer to. I had an instinctive sense that this would be fun and good for poetry teaching and learning but I had almost no personal experience of it. I enjoyed poetry as a child and had memorised things – Maths formulae, the whole of my O Level French vocabulary book, the lyrics of any number of dreadful 1970s songs – but the only encouragement to learn poetry had been about leaning ‘quotes’ for exams: a word or phrase, a line or two to gain extra marks for path and polish. These lines and phrases have stayed with me all my life.

Understanding by experiencing
Undeterred, and as part of proving the pudding by eating it, I set myself the challenge of learning a poem I had never read before and to perform it as part of a Year 6 pupil workshop. I found my way to an anthology

Sarveen: ‘I think the key is, when you’re performing, to really lose yourself, because when you’re in the poem then everyone else is and I think that’s really important.’

Nessa: ‘Remember that your audience is appreciative of poetry, so you’re in good hands, and really just to give it your best shot. Don’t worry what your interpretation of the poem is like, just say it the way you feel is best.’

Imagine this: your school champion is at a county contest in a local library or community arts venue and the MG, a vibrant local poet, announces the winner. Your student – and you – are on your way to the expenses-paid grand finals weekend to compete to become regional and then national champion.

Imagine your student on a national stage, the audience holding its breath, willing him or her to be wonderful, loving the poetry, celebrating these remarkable achievements by young people, and then the rapturous applause. Imagine meeting poets Andrew Motion, Jean Sprackland, Daljit Nagra, Owen Sheers, Jacob Sam-La Rose, Patience Agbabi, and hearing Roger McGough introduce your student recite their poem on BBC Radio 4’s Poetry Please.

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Imagine this: thousands of young people in the ‘exam years’ at secondary school freely spending time learning two poems by heart. One poem is published before 1914, one poem after; from a selection of 200 poems spanning two poems by heart. One poem is published before 1914, and understand poetry.

Imagine This: teachers in hundreds of secondary schools and colleges organising a contest so that their students can share their poetry learning accomplishments. Imagine a school in which every form is challenged to give it a go, all 700 pupils getting at least a taste of their work. The Archive is the premier online collection of recordings of English language poets from all over the world reading their own work – and contemporary poets reading the work of ‘classic’ poets who lived before electronic recording technologies existed.

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Phoenix: 'It’s so important to remember that it’s not necessarily a competition, I mean, it is formally, but just coming up here and doing it, it’s more like a show or like a festival of poetry, so you should just enjoy it. Show that process of enjoyment when you read that poem first – you’ve got to show it on stage, and that’s really enjoyable to watch.'

Mark: ‘Take your time. Because it’s your time – the most of it, don’t rush it, enjoy it. If you need to take a pause, take a pause – breathe, don’t rush and let your nerves get the better of you.’

Tom: ‘It was just quite wrack-wracking getting up there first, but once it was all over I was glad that I had done it, and I really did enjoy it.’

Then the poem takes over – it’s fanciful but I imagine the lone dog taking over too. We’re outside, we’re free. I could not quite put the poem as a Jack Russell on the other side of the sharp stone wall running along the width of the garden harkening and the ‘Not for me’ repetition means I have the next couplet in a second. Now, suddenly, I AM the lone dog. I’ve leapt over dozens of garden walls. I’m up on the Downs, high above the Avon gorge, it’s night, the sky is straddled with stars and I’m sniffing the wind. I have the poem and I am completely surprised and delighted.

Detailed acts of noticing

It takes a week to embed the poem I retrace my steps through the Memory Temple and after a few days I no longer need this support. I keep checking back to the poem and I start thinking about how to perform it. This is where things get really interesting. First, I kept getting the order of the words in a muddle. In this particular poem there are lots of pairs of parallel adjectives, sometimes rhyming, sometimes not: is it ‘lean’ and ‘keen’, or ‘keen’ and ‘lean’? Likewise, is it tough/rough or tough/rough, bad/mad or mad/bad, and so on? I develop ways of remembering these: it has to be lean first because it balances in an alliterative way the final stanza ‘rough’ comes before ‘tough’ because R comes before T in the alphabet, ‘bad’ comes before ‘mad’ because ‘mad’ is of a higher incremental order of badness. These are solutions to a memory problem but they are also detailed acts of noticing, a first step to understanding anything and especially language; structure and form in a poem.

I started thinking about the character of the dog and how he would speak but that got me nowhere. I had a few goes at speaking in a sort of cock doggy growl, but the sing-song rhythm of the poem utterly undermined that and besides, this is a poem written by a poet, not a transcript of a dog talking (or a translation of a dog barking). Remembering the idea that a poet is not so much adopting a persona as speaking from behind a mask, I was quickly freed from the growl and bared incisors. It also opened up a wider space in the poem: first, I noted in a more formal way that the poem at least is to explain it, but I’ll try to ‘demonstrate’ what I did. It was just quite nerve-wracking getting up there first, but once it was all over I was glad that I had done it, and I really did enjoy it.'
Anderson: ‘It was quite difficult at first to be in the mind-set of what the poet had intended to come across, but through learning the poem, which is what this is all about, you do start to – without communicating with the person themselves – deeply understand what it means. I think that’s the powerful thing about poetry and why things like this competition are so important to society, because we have to remember that we are living in a modern world now where there’s technology everywhere but I still think it’s good to have something that’s been going on for hundreds of thousands of years, connecting us physically as well as emotionally.’

Kieran: ‘When you’re working on the recital of a poem, you’re always in a team of two: there’s you and there’s the poem, and the poem really has to be its own stage directions – everything comes from inside that. You just have to find a way not to get in its way.’

“I learned that people love hearing a poem recited, and that they listen with a depth I have never encountered elsewhere.”

especially the longer final lines of each stanza: ‘I love to sit and bay the moon and keep fat souls from sleep’. I read it first as an iambic heptameter {-/-/-/-/-/-/} creating a slowing effect, the lone dog savouring his easy control. That didn’t feel right so I tried it with four strong beats. When I recited the poem like this, shifting between regular anapaests {/--} and the potentially more chaotic tumbling of feet with an extra unstressed syllable {/---}, I hoped to create a performance that would hold in tension the fragile balance between control and chaos that I wanted to find in the poem. In fact, I’m not nearly a good enough performer to be able to do that convincingly, but a deeper level of understanding came from giving it a go.

In this textured out-loud reading, the poem went from being a cute dog poem to one which enacts the poet’s mask gradually slipping off. It became evidence, proved countless times over in Poetry By Heart, that age-stamping poems is a fool’s errand. Though I’m not advocating giving nine year olds ‘The Wasteland’ just yet, it is in the nature of poetry that it allows us to find the meanings we’re ready to make. Meaning does lie within the form of the poem, but it also lies outside it. That’s what makes it what Andrew Motion called, in his speech at the first launch of Poetry By Heart, ‘a form of two-way travelling, at once into ourselves and back out again’.

A risk worth taking

I then performed my poem. Not yet to the Year 6 pupils but to assorted adults I have assailed in the manner of the Ancient Mariner, and to this year’s Poetry By Heart finalists. I learned what a risk you take when you do so: the sweaty hands, the nervous apologies and hesitations, the gut-wrenching fear of failure. But I also learned that people love hearing a poem recited, however haltingly; that they listen with a depth I have never encountered elsewhere; and they waft you along, welcoming, supportive and endlessly forgiving, triumphing with you when you reach the end. It is a risk – but one worth taking.

Poetry By Heart launches again for 2015 at NATE conference in Bristol at the end of June. You can register to take part, receive news updates or regular blogposts about poetry teaching and learning at www.poetrybyheart.org.uk. In the meantime, we have a summer Facebook challenge for you and your students: check out the advert in this magazine.

Note: the quotes featured throughout this article are real quotes from interviews with finalists, but the students’ names have been changed.

Julie Blake
is Education Director of The Poetry Archive.

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