Premier’s English Scholarship

Language and Poetry History

Fiona Pollock

Carlingford High School

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Aims of my Premier’s English Scholarship study tour

The focus of my scholarship tour was to study dialect and language history as it developed in English rural poetry, and how this could be taught with the help of technology, performance and specialised academic institutions. In doing this, I intended to create teaching and learning resource that would be helpful in enabling the teaching of the new Australian Curriculum, while meeting the standards of the Quality Teaching Framework and also acting as a resource for students and teachers to access the wider academic world.

The preservation of dialect, in the United Kingdom, a country with such a wide range of language and dialects, is essential for Australians, so that students may feel better able to appreciate and preserve their literary history. By focusing on the study of this through performance poetry, I intended to take advantage of technology to engage students who are perhaps less interested in traditional texts, while still enabling gifted and talented students to extend their interests. The texts choices have a particular focus on rural poetry, to reflect the rich literary historical context of the Australian dialect.

It was especially important to me that I was able to promote the idea that poetry was an important part of modern life and literature, relevant, in particular, to boys, as I believe that poetry often has a low status amongst students, especially low socioeconomic boys who often seem to regard is as boring, irrelevant, or difficult.

As a marker for the Higher School Certificate (HSC), I had also noted how the final Board of Studies comments made in regards to poetry for the Extension 2 course had often commented on the way that students did not always have a good grasp of the mechanics, language, canon or history of poetry. Although senior subjects were not the focus of my tour, I intended my website to act as a resource to begin addressing this problem in lower years of schooling.

Finally, I wanted to create a resource which would enable rural students in particular to have more of an idea about what kind of humanities resources there were in the world. I wanted to create a resource that teachers could use introduce such places to students, and potentially open their academic world, and enable students to understand more of the potential for study and academic careers.

I am very grateful to the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities and the Premier of New South Wales, the Honourable Barry O'Farrell MP, for the opportunity to extend my knowledge, and also the knowledge of teachers and students across Australia. My thanks must also go to the many poets and performers, teachers, librarians and academics who I met in my stay in England, Scotland, Wales and South Australia.

Interviewees and performers

My study tour was taken over five weeks from 21 October 2012 to 24 November 2012. I arranged interviews with academics, librarians, poets and performers in a range of educational and community organisations in Australia and also in England, Scotland and Wales.

These included:

* + Professor Tom Burton, University of Adelaide, who teaches language history, English and poetry, and performs poetry for the Adelaide Fringe Festival and other events.
  + Students from the University of Adelaide: Mr Steven Warner, Ms Pia Gaardboe, plus others who wished to remain anonymous
  + Professor Ghilad Zuckermann, University of Adelaide, who is professor of Linguistics & Endangered Languages.
  + Beat Technique, (Mr Dean Yhnell) a poet rapper and member of Beat-Spoke and Reconcile
  + Doriengrey (Mr. Sheldon Derrick), a poet rapper who is a member of Beat-Spoke
  + Mr Sean Knox, a open microphone competition promoter
  + Mr Tim Porteus, a dialect storyteller who performs for the Scottish Storytelling Centre
  + Mrs Rachel Glennie, head of English at Thomas Hardye High School in Dorchester, England and her staff
  + Mr Michael Hance and his staff from the [Scots Language Centre in Perth, Scotland](http://www.scotslanguage.com)
  + Ms Phillipa Jacobs, a painter of poetry themed pictures from Holyhead, Wales
  + Mrs Julia Want, volunteer at the John Jarrod Printing Museum
  + Mr Michael Rattigan, an poet of English, Irish and Indian descent, author of *Liminal* published by Rufus Books

I also attended poetry performances and discussion sessions afterwards with many poets. These included:

* + Several *Poetry Unplugged* and other open microphone performances at the *Poetry Cafe* in London
  + The release of Michael Rattigan's poetry book *Liminal*
  + Open microphone performance at *10 Feet Tall* in Cardiff
  + Open microphone performance at *The Green Room* in Perth
  + Open microphone performance at *The Caledonian* in Perth
  + Final poetry readings at The University of Adelaide for the *Reading and Writing Poetry* course
  + *Vanishing Voices,* at the University of Adelaide
  + Jazz poetry performances at *The Winter Festival* in London
  + *The Last Mughal* by William Dalrymple and Vidya Shah at the British Library
  + Street poets, as part of *The Winter Festival,* Trafalgar Square
  + Readings at *Coffee House Poetry*
  + *14 Magazine* poetry magazine launch in conjunction with performances by contributors at the *London Poetry Cafe*
  + A performance of poetry by the English poet laureate, Professor Carol Ann Duffy, which included the premiere of her new poem *A Human Haunt,* readings of the winning entries from the *Southwark Cathedral Poetry Competition* for 2012 and performances by the *Merbecke Choir.*

In total I saw approximately fifty poets perform their works.

Highlights of my tour - Adelaide, South Australia

In October 2012 I travelled to the University of Adelaide, where I interviewed Professor Tom Burton. Burton has used many different ways of using performance to teach students, including the Fringe Festival, using students as performers; the Chaucer Studio, which provides recordings of Anglo Saxon English, Middle English, Old Norse and Old German to universities, researchers and linguists worldwide; and Radio Adelaide. He has designed a specialist reading and writing course in traditional poetry forms. The importance of developing discipline as a writer is a focus of the new Australian curriculum with its specific requirements of learning about grammar and mechanics. Learning the traditional forms, the construction of poetry, and the performance of it in an effective way, the history of language and dialect all require students to learn grammar, vocabulary and discipline of language choices.

As part of my time with Professor Burton, I was able to see two lectures and eight tutorials in his course, enabling me to see best practice for teaching poetry performance, and also giving me a better idea of how to prepare HSC students for the demands of a humanities course at university. Burton encourages his students to engage in poetry readings and performance as part of the course. This benefits students by teaching them how to edit by sound and reading out loud - an extremely effective way of editing for style. He has also explained how he arranges for the peer editing and review of student poems in order to publish an anthology of poems produced in his course, giving his students the opportunity to be professionally published while still at university. This has given me ideas about the ways student work can be made more authentic, with a real audience, and I intend to include ideas about this on my final website.

I interviewed several poetry students from Professor Burton's course and I intend to include these recordings as podcasts on my website. This has given me a better understanding of modern poetry as written by young emerging poets, and also in the challenges that young people find in learning about dialect poetry, language history and poetry performance. I believe that the recordings will be engaging to students by giving them a chance to hear poets of nearly their own ages.

Burton has provided me with recordings of Anglo Saxon and Middle English, which can be used to assist students to understand English language history and development. He has also suggested resources for teaching language history, and I was able to collect resources for this, such as photocopies of articles, while at the university. His interview has also increased my knowledge of the relationship between language, literature and historical context.

While at Adelaide University I also spoke with Professor Ghilad Zuckermann. I discussed with Professor Zuckermann his work in the reviving of endangered Aboriginal languages and dialects of Aboriginal English, an important goal for Australia, which has a very serious danger of losing Aboriginal languages completely. Professor Zuckermann has provided me with articles that gifted and talented students will be able to use to expand their knowledge of and interest in the history of English and its impact on other languages, such as Aboriginal languages. Students will gain a deeper understanding of community responsibility towards preserving endangered languages and dialects and literary historical knowledge of minority groups.

I also attended *Vanishing Voices,* featuring Ms Rivka Amado, a performer of endangered languages, which gave me a better understanding of the importance of preserving dialects, how this might be done through public performance and the causes and effects of language loss.

Highlights of my tour – England, Scotland and Wales

During my time in London I visited several important academic institutions. One of these was the British Library. Here I was able to do more research of the history of English, and of dialect poetry, which the library holds many volumes of, and has recordings held in its sound archives. I was also able to extensively explore the collections of the library which have been made available through online technologies, and to create worksheets for students that require them to learn more about the library - and therefore potentially expose isolated gifted and talented students in particular to a very sophisticated academic world.

I also visited several of England’s museums, including the British Museum and London Science Museum. This provided me with the opportunity to gather photographs and examples of websites, and to listen to lectures, experts and sound recordings that informed me about the social, political, ethnic and other influences which had affected the creation of England’s rural poetry and dialects. My knowledge of how to teach literature in context – an important part of both the New South Wales syllabus and also the Australian Curriculum – has been enhanced by these visits, and I have begun to adapt learning materials in units of work I teach as a result of this, beginning with a unit on Victorian literature for year 11 Extension, and also a junior war poetry unit.

In London I attended several poetry performances and launches of a book and a magazine at the [London Poetry Society](http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk). My time here enabled me to see how the poetry scene is promoted in England, through such events as the poetry on the underground campaign, a cafe where poets can come together to discuss and edit work, access to a specialised library of books and magazines, and a wide range of opportunities for professional and amateur performances.

As part of this I spoke with many of the poet performers. This enabled me to experience the current trends in poetry, and the uses of performance to enhance meaning and audience appeal.

From these interviews I have also increased my knowledge of the use of groups to support writing and editing. This I saw in poetry cafes, writing groups and audience question sessions done during open microphone and competition performances. Similar ideas could be incorporated at the class level, not only in poetry but also in studies of drama and prose fiction. Poetry writing done with engaging performance opportunities gives students an opportunity to write for a real audience, and also the chance of learning presentation skills. Resources made as a result of these interviews will be incorporated in the poetry units I teach, and also in the resources I share with other schools

While in London, I visited the Saison Poetry Library at the Southbank Centre. The poetry section of school libraries and Australian bookstores is often very small, compared with, for example, novels and non-fiction. A typical school has anthologies of poetry, and study guides, but usually a restricted number of resources about the history, scansion, interpretation or performance of poetry. This library had thousands of books on every possible aspect of poetry, and I was able to make a collection of articles to share with other teachers, and also for students to use as research for poetry analysis. I was able to speak with specialist poetry librarians, listen to recordings, learn more about the promotion of poetry and the activities the library does with students. As a result of my visit, I will be modifying a junior picture book unit for the new Australian Curriculum.

One poetry performance in London that I was privileged to attend was that of Carol Ann Duffy, the Poet Laureate for England. This performance, done in conjunction with the Southwark Cathedral, gave me the opportunity to study how poetry, in conjunction with a community church, plus a choir, art exhibition and a competition, could reach out to the general public. I believe that one way to raise the profile of poetry in schools would be to take advantage of music performances, drama nights and art exhibitions to incorporate poetry as well, an idea that will be explored in my units of work.

At Reading, I was able to research at the [Museum for English Rural Life](http://www.reading.ac.uk/merl). This very specialised museum holds an enormous collection of rural literature and resources from both England its former colonies. It includes a collection of resources on studying rural dialect poetry and literature in context. Rural poetry is especially important in preserving the range of English dialects, and of course understanding it gave me a better idea of how to teach the history of Australian poetry in context, which has incorporated rural subjects for much of its history. I was also able to see artifacts, photographs and recordings of rural life which gave me a better knowledge of the content of many of the rural dialect poems I was planning to include in my website.

My next stop was Dorchester, in Dorset. Dorset is the home of one of England's most important dialect poets, William Barnes, who wrote extensively about rural life including poems about immigration to Australia, and the social problems that existed in England at the time Australia was colonised. I was able to study the Dorchester library’s Barnes collection, and also to collect photographs of the places where Barnes worked and lived. Barnes’ poetry will make up some of the worksheets that I have planned for study of 19th century rural dialect poetry. Professor Tom Burton is an expert of Barnes’ poetry, and I have been able to collect recordings of his and his students’ performances of some of the poems, which will also help students to engage with and understand the way that language changes over time.

My tour enabled me to speak with poets from a range of the English dialect backgrounds that have contributed to Australian English, and in Cardiff I was able to interview two young Welsh rap poets, who perform freestyle beat boxing and rap poetry. This performance attracted a large number of teenagers and university students, and informed me about how poetry can take many forms and that both traditional and modern poems can be entertaining and engaging to a student audience. It enables me to present students with examples of how poetry can be relevant to a range of people with varied ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and how it is a modern text type, not merely something studied in class. I also interviewed an open microphone competition promoter, Mr Sean Knox, who shared his experiences of the challenges and benefits of organising rap poetry performances for young people. These events at Cardiff will be used as examples for students to learn about possible careers in poetry, and the value of youth dialects.

Another institution I visited, the Scots Language Centre in Perth, also assisted me in gaining ideas and resources for teaching dialect. The website for this organisation is extensive, and includes all sorts of ideas for preserving and teaching dialect poetry and assisting people to value their language history. The staff explained the challenges and successes they had experienced in preserving the Scots language and Scottish dialects of English for young people. I also interviewed Mr Tim Porteus, a Scots storyteller, who uses dialect stories and poetry in the community, schools and arts events. I was able to learn more about the importance of valuing dialect in education and the community in order to help students develop a sense of identity and the ways in which dialect literature can be made not only engaging, but also fun, amusing, and provoking.

Technology has had an important effect on the development of dialect, and also on who is able to read, write and publish, and who is able to learn and to be informed and educated. The John Jarrold Printing Museum in Norwich is a specialist museum that explores the effect of technology on writing. This visit enabled me to speak with printing, bookbinding and conservation experts, and to take photographs of printing technology from illuminated manuscripts to modern computer equipment. These resources, in conjunction with interviews and the examples of important historical texts I studied in libraries and castles will enable me to produce teaching resources for showing the effect of technology on the history of the English language. It is important, I believe, that in a modern digital technology dominated world, students have an understanding of how technological advances have affected what we write, read and perform. I also intend to include podcasts and suggestions focusing technology for poetry performance on my site.

Significant learning – results of my tour

My tour was an excellent opportunity to explore language history and poetry performance, and to deepen my understanding of how these can be made available to all students through technology. My discussions with the performers and academics have instigated many ideas for classroom learning.

My tour convinced me, particularly, on the importance of using performance to engage students’ initial interest in poetry, and then moving from that interest to the more demanding challenges of technical scansion, interpretation and history analysis. Throughout my tour I saw young people involved in the poetry community, from many ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. I would like, through my website, to encourage more of this.

Completing this tour has allowed me to develop ideas and resources for engaging students who are limited in their access to the academic world, such as rural, low socioeconomic and isolated gifted and talented students. It has given me more confidence in how to teach the new Australian Curriculum, and a better understanding of poetry in context.

The chance to hear poetry which is not in standard or received English, to hear poets and performers value minority dialects, to see the history of minority dialects, and understand thereby that all ways of speaking can be valued for their heritages and to see rural life valued in literature have all been a privilege that I have experienced in my scholarship.