

Shared Writing via Contemporary Poetry

Background: After attending a talk by Pie Corbett on the use of shared writing, I became aware of the various benefits that can be derived by engaging students in creative writing activities during their lessons. A few days after this talk I attended a creative writing course led by the prize-winning poet Gerard Woodward and much of the writing we did during this course was spurred on by our reading and discussion of a number of contemporary poems.

These two events made me realise that Maltese students are missing out on a lot due to the fact that creative writing does not feature in the A-level English syllabus. I decided to use shared writing with a class of sixteen-year-old L2 speakers of English preparing for a high stakes examination in which poetry is assessed by means of the traditional critical response. However, I was aware that this was going to be a new experience for the majority of my students. A pilot study conducted with a group of Maltese sixth formers shows that 72% of students would not like to be given the opportunity of writing poetry in class; they seem to consider it at odds with the examination's character.



Shared writing is described as an activity in which the teacher acts as a scribe and the students, either as a class or else in small groups, help the teacher rewrite the model text.

Booth and Swartz (2004) describe it as 'writing *with* students' (p. 74) and Palmer and Corbett (2003) underscore its importance by claiming that 'where teachers do not use shared writing, then they are not teaching writing' (p. 55).

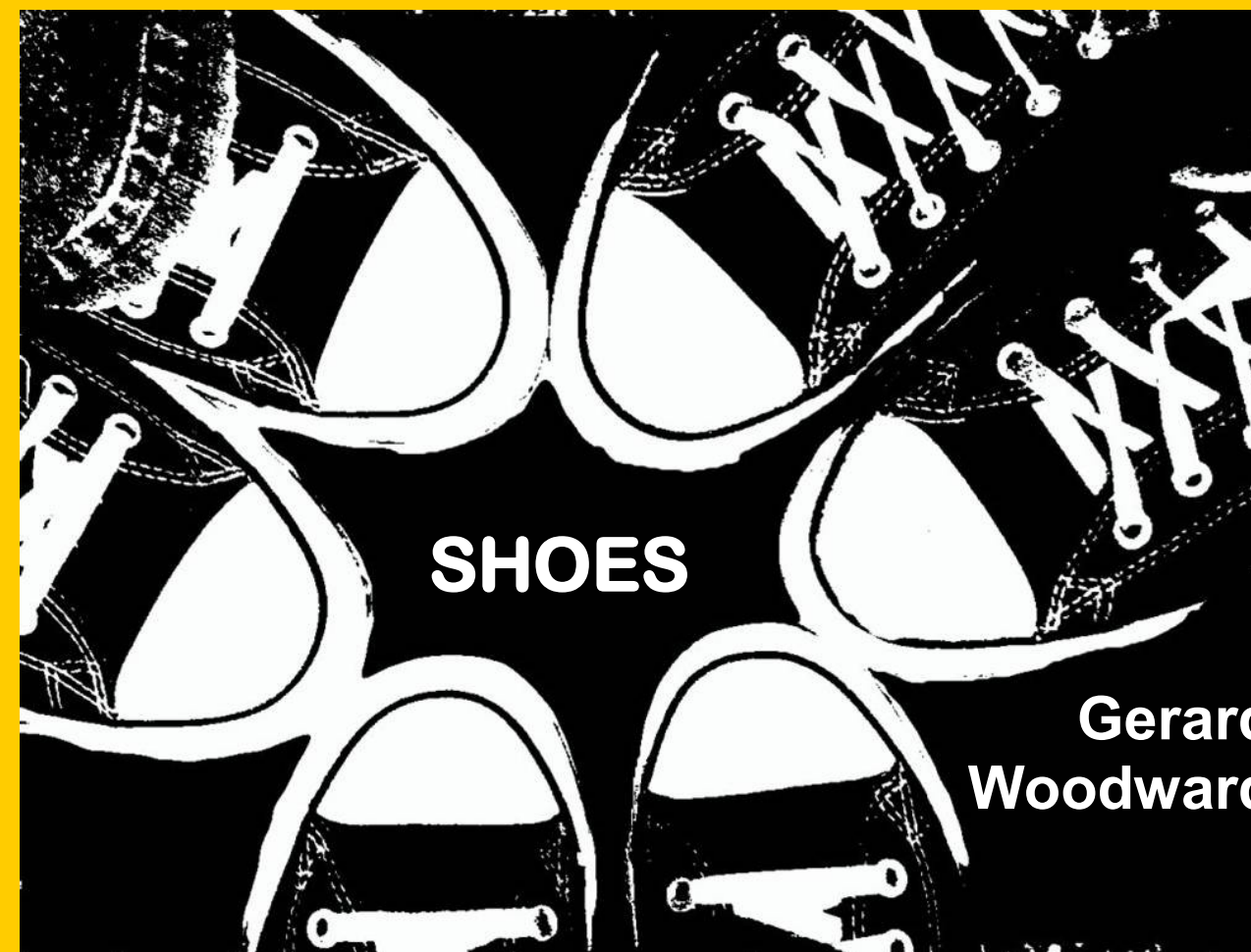
Why Practise Shared Writing?

- The writing process is made clear to the students while they generate ideas and contribute to the writing of a text in a supportive environment.
- Students play with the language used by an expert.
- Inspires students and allows them to appreciate the possibilities afforded by language and poetry.

Which Model?

I adapted Palmer and Corbett's model of teaching shared writing to serve the needs of a class of upper secondary students reading Woodward's (2005) poem 'Shoes' during what the official timetable defined as a literary criticism lesson.

Even though I use Palmer and Corbett's terminology I am not entirely faithful to their suggested technique. The terms **imitation**, **innovation** and **invention** describe the shared writing of a tripartite poem given that the rewriting of each part required the students to engage in somewhat different activities.



As he outgrows each pair of shoes,
From mouse-like pumps
To embryonic trainers, sparkling
Jelly shoes, teddy bear slippers,

I take them and I burn them,
Funnelling the ashes and oily
Residues of each into a stoppered
Glass jar and range them on a shelf,

The level of cinders increasing
With each, so that I have a broken
Path in my mind, of every
Step he's taken up till now.

Woodward's Perspective

The main impulse of the poem was to say something about the way we preserve memories of children as they grow up. I did save my children's shoes – they are very expressive of them as people (very small people), and the shoe is probably the most personalised form of garment because it seems to mould itself around the foot, it bears traces of use etc etc. Plus they get through shoes very quickly as they grow up, and there seem bewilderingly wide varieties of shoes available, so many different sorts that, together, they almost form a unique 'thumbprint' of the child's identity. The idea of burning them and preserving the ashes takes this a little step further (I didn't do this in reality – but I'd heard of someone else who had). The final image is of a cinder path divided between the jars – path=shoes=journey=life which I felt brought together all my feelings about those things.

Outcomes:

- High level of engagement.
- Confidence through collaboration.
- Appreciation of creative writing's contribution to critical reading.
- Better understanding of the writing process and use of language in poetry.

Discussion: Students watched an animated version of 'Shoes' before actually being given a printed copy of the poem. Then they formed groups of four and discussed the poem's core components and structure by means of a set of questions:

- Who is the speaker?
- About whom is the speaker talking?
- What's the main theme?
- What's the main function of each stanza?



After each student had sufficiently contributed to the discussion of the poem, I showed the class a slide with Woodward's comments on his work.

Reformulation: Collaboratively, students thought of a new speaker, a new subject, a new relationship, and a new theme. They kept in mind that the new poem had to have the same structure as the original and thus each stanza had to have the same function. After considering the originality and interest of the different ideas proposed by the different groups, we finally settled on one specific relationship, that of a daughter and her mother.

Imitation: Together we started by rewriting Woodward's first stanza and this only entailed substituting the shoes mentioned in the original with shoes a middle-aged woman would wear. The students realised that 'outgrows' in the first line is a key word and hence they needed to come up with something as equally effective.

As she dumps each pair of shoes,
From stiletto heels
To beaded sandals, towering
Boots, glove-like trainers,

Innovation: For the rewriting of the second stanza the students had to keep in mind that 'take' and 'burn' in Woodward's poem are of crucial importance because they are describing an unusual kind of behaviour on the speaker's part. So the students had to think of something that would be considered equally uncommon and interesting. Their choice of verbs would help reveal the speaker's identity and behaviour. After considering a number of options the students finally agreed that the idea of pinching shoes from the cellar and hiding them in the darkness beneath the bed was the most appealing one.

I pinch them and I hide them,
Stacked beneath my bed
Where it's too dark to see
And I need to feel for each one,

Invention: The rewriting of the third stanza partly depended on the choices the students had made in relation to the speaker's actions and identity. However, they needed to connect the speaker, the shoes and the subject in some way or other. The missing ingredient they had to discover was an overarching theme that would give unity to the whole poem. Sensing their longing to go on writing I asked them to finish the poem on their own at home.

The variation of shoes never ending,
Each one leaving me an assortment
Of colours along the floor, a track
Of the different roles she plays.

The mountain of shoes growing
Steadily, so that I have a stupendous
Secret treasured in my room,
Foreshadowing the woman I shall be.

The line beneath my bed increasing
With each, so that I have an image
Of what I will look like when I grow up,
A reflection of my mother.

- References:
- Booth, D. and Swartz, L. (2004) *Literacy techniques for building successful readers and writers*, 2nd ed. Ontario: Pembroke Publishers.
 - Palmer, S. and Corbett, P. (2003) *Literacy: What works?* Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes.
 - Woodward, G. (2005) 'Shoes', *We were pedestrians*. London: Chatto & Windus.