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Abstract

This paper considers alternative ways of teaching Romantic poetry to post-sixteen English Literature pupils in England. It explores how practitioners can value tangents developed by pupils' independent thinking when pupils are given the freedom to develop their own ideas. It reflects on a lesson planned to respond to a tangent developed by the class in a previous session; that William Blake's 'The Tyger', to a contemporary reader, explores the 21st century preoccupation of climate change. The lesson outlined in this report built upon these ideas further, valuing the pupils' tangential thinking. Approaches like these are particularly important now as the performativity agenda in schools, promoted by league tables as a measure of effectiveness, can result in some schools teaching to the test, at the exclusion of encouraging personal and creative responses to texts.

Key Words: William Blake; A Level; English Literature; climate change; Romantic poetry; authentic reading

Introduction

This paper originated from a discussion that took place in a post-sixteen English Literature class. In the lesson, the class developed ideas about William Blake's 'The Tyger.' I asked each pupil to read the poem for the first time themselves and write down their initial ideas, taking mental notes of key phrases and words. During the whole class discussion, one pupil remarked:

Blake depicts the destruction of the natural world in the context of the Industrial Revolution. Perhaps the 'Tyger burning bright' was meant to be taken literally. Both the majestic 'Tyger' and the 'forests' are on fire. With today's climate emergency, you'd be forgiven for thinking this was written in the recent past.

Other members of the class were keen to explore this idea. This pupil had confidently contextualised Blake's poetry within its own history and highlighted his continuing relevance within the preoccupations of 21st century society.

This comment resonated so much as, for me, Blake's legacy and initiative are part of his genius. 'The Chimney Sweeper' from *Songs of Innocence* embodied ideas of false consciousness almost a century before Marx and Engels had used the term themselves (Norton, 2014). Blake's initiative goes beyond false consciousness, with critics contending that his poetry pre-empted the work done by Freud and Jung (Hume George, 1980).

This pupil's reading of Blake's poem presented me with a challenge. Giovanelli and Mason (2015) and Lawrence (2019) outlined approaches that put pupils' independent readings at the heart of lesson delivery, and I had borrowed these approaches in the past in the teaching of single lessons. However, this pupil's comment raised the simple question, 'what next?' If we are to respond to and encourage personal responses to texts, developed by the pupils themselves, how can teachers find ways to follow and guide pupils' curiosity? How can we build on the knowledge base already established with Giovanelli and Mason (2015) and Lawrence (2019) to value and encourage divergent thinking and tangents?

This paper reflects how a group of six English Literature pupils engaged with Blake's poetry when it was framed within the context of the 21st century climate emergency, building on pupils' tangential thinking.

Background Literature

The English literary canon is a body of work that critics agree to be of high quality (Pope, 1998). Canonical texts often form the core syllabuses in schools, colleges and universities (Montgomery, Durant, Fabb, Furniss, & Mills, 2007). The canon itself is contentious; cultural paradigms shift but the presence of a canon of supposedly esteemed texts means that what is studied in schools tends not to change (Green & LeBihan, 1995) or, at the very least, it changes slowly. In England, after completing compulsory education at age 16, pupils can choose to continue studying subjects at an Advanced Level (A-Level). The English Literature A-Level for the AQA (an awarding body) contains the study of authors and poets considered to be part of the canon of English literature. The specification mandates the study of a Shakespeare play and offers the optional study of texts by William Blake, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, Geoffrey Chaucer and John Keats (AQA, 2019).

Cushing argues that, as a result of a culture of high stakes testing, a teach to the test approach is adopted in some schools, where the simple transmission of knowledge from teacher to pupil is the preferred pedagogical approach as opposed to encouraging creative responses to texts (Cushing, 2018). We know that entries to the English A-Levels have dropped drastically since the introduction of the reformed GCSE (Weale, 2019). NATE's Spring newsletter tells us that this is, quite rightly, being explored in further detail (NATE, 2020). Potentially this teach to the test approach promoted by some schools in the teaching of GCSEs could be a reason for the decline in uptake of post-sixteen English courses.

A reaction to 'teaching to the test' is Giovanelli and Mason's concept of 'authentic reading' (Giovanelli & Mason, 2015). They assert that pupils are able to experience a text for the first

time only once and if this interaction is impeded by a teacher's ideas or learning objectives, a phenomenon they refer to as 'pre-figuring', pupils have missed the opportunity to have a genuine engagement with that text themselves (Giovanelli & Mason, 2015). For a reading to be 'authentic', pupils 'must have the space to interpret the text, to experience it themselves' (p.42). This approach is underpinned by Rosenblatt's reader response theory, which contends that reading is primarily an interaction between text and reader (Rosenblatt, 1938). Follow up studies have shown that trainee teachers believed authentic reading to be a worthwhile approach to studying a text but were unsure how it would fit in to an education system underpinned by exam dogma (Lawrence, 2019).

In claiming that pupils' exam responses to literary texts should be 'informed, personal and creative' (Ofqual, 2014), Ofqual, the UK government body responsible for ratifying exam board specifications in England, seem to acknowledge that literature is a transaction between text and reader. However, they do so with the condition that candidates must 'demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received' (Ofqual, 2014). In other words, pupils can draw on how they interpret the text as a young person growing up in the 21st century, but they must also possess knowledge of the text and the time in which it was written. In order to successfully deliver the syllabus, a teacher must give pupils the space to formulate their own creative responses to texts whilst providing the knowledge needed to contextualise them. In equipping pupils with this knowledge, teachers can guide them from being passive to 'active readers of poetry' (Xerri, 2013, p.135).

Approaches to teaching Romantic poetry itself have varied. Some approaches have 'remixed' canonical, traditional texts with modern texts and popular culture. One study reported that this had positive effects as pupils remixed Blake's 'Holy Thursday' and Macklemore's song 'Same

Love.’ The pupils in the study drew comparisons between both texts and how they shared themes about social injustice (Bowmer, 2016).

Although incorporating popular culture in to teaching can be fruitful, teachers’ personal preferences may influence what popular culture they teach and how they incorporate it into lessons (Hagood, Alvermann, & Heron-Hruby, 2010). This is challenging as it can create a divide between what popular culture the pupils are interested in and the beliefs of the teacher (Bowmer, 2016).

Thomas (2010) contends that approaches to teaching Romantic poetry have focused on the poems themselves, as opposed to a combined approach that blends Romantic literature and visual culture. There has been success in using the ~~latter—approach~~[latter approach](#) in the teaching of Gothic fiction (Behrendt, 2003). The content of the visual images used need not relate directly to the piece of literature being studied, but could link more broadly to themes, ideas and intellectual questions surrounding the literature itself (Behrendt, 2003). This approach is of importance in the study of Blake. His poetry is visual, not just with lexical imagery, but also with the engravings and paintings that were created alongside his poems (Makdisi, 2015). As Blake’s engravings and paintings ~~are inextricable~~[are inextricable](#) from his poem’s meanings, one would hope that they are taught and discussed in tandem to his poems. However, the copy of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* provided by AQA as part of the English Literature course contains only the poems, with little reference to Blake’s paintings.

Research Design

This research utilises a case study approach in analysing two lessons on Blake’s poem ‘The Tyger’ with a group of six A-Level English Literature pupils. The initial lesson was delivered by me and the second lesson involved the presentation of an optional homework task. These sessions were then followed up with written, guided reflection.

Research ethics permission was obtained from the school's head teacher before data collection took place. As the study involved young people, some of whom were under the age of eighteen, the guidelines outlined by BERA (2018) were used to inform the study. Informed consent was sought and obtained to use data collected during the research. An 'opt in' approach was chosen with both parents and pupils being asked to consent for either their or their child's data to be used. For any pupils who did not return a consent form, their data was destroyed and not included in this report. Throughout the paper, pupils are not referred to by name.

Being the class' teacher will have affected how I will have interpreted data and the interactions that took place as part of the lesson. However, in analysing data I made active attempts to maintain epistemological reflexivity.

The purpose of these lessons was not to introduce the poem for the first time – the class had already studied 'The Tyger' before and had prior knowledge of Blake and his poetry - but to respond to the tangential thinking arising from the pupils' own, unimpeded interpretations of texts. I designed the research to explore whether following pupils' tangential and independent learning journeys, linked to their own experiences and priorities, results in 'learning', and how that can be understood within a classroom context.

I planned the lessons to follow on from the previous lesson by placing the climate emergency at the heart of the learning. The pupils were keen to explore this area in more detail but were unsure how they could. They said that the knowledge they had of climate change was limited to what they had seen in the media and they did not have a concrete enough understanding of it to be able to apply it to the poem. In the design of this lesson, I wanted to build knowledge of climate change, whilst also giving the pupils the confidence to use their pre-existing knowledge, no matter how limited, to formulate an eco-critical reading of the poem.

The following pedagogical approaches were implemented to address this objective:

- 1) The first task involved the class being split in to two groups. Three pupils examined a picture of a late 18th century industrial city (History Crunch, n.d). The other three pupils examined a modern photo with industrial chimneys (National Geographic, n.d). They initially reflected on their sources independently before being given three minutes to discuss their ideas as a group. Each group then explained their source to the other group. The discussion that followed on from this activity was intended to develop pupils' knowledge of climate change and environmental issues.
- 2) I read the poem aloud. Each member of the group was then given a stanza to read aloud before being asked to write down their initial responses to the poem.
- 3) I then posed the question: *"Does the poem relate to the sources we examined at the beginning of the lesson?"* The pupils spent five minutes independently drawing comparisons between the sources from the starter and 'The Tyger.' They were then invited to share their responses with the rest of the group.
- 4) The class were once again split in to two groups of three. They were tasked with adopting William Blake's persona themselves and creating a vlog – a short video that reflects a person's internal thoughts and feelings - that detailed his (fictional) attitude towards 21st century climate change, whilst referencing lines from 'The Tyger.' These were then presented at the end of the lesson. I used this task for pupils to utilise their pre-existing knowledge of climate change and the newly acquired knowledge from the beginning of the lesson.
- 5) The class were then given voluntary homework. This was to take 'The Tyger' and 'remix' it with another, modern text. They were given a week to complete this task at the end of which, they presented their remixed poem to the rest of the group.

Rationale

As Cushing (2018) notes, pedagogical approaches in secondary schools often take the form of teaching to the test. Throughout this session, I attempted to avoid referring to any form of assessment objective. Instead, the lesson was designed around tasks that academic literature has shown to work in the teaching of historical and canonical texts.

The first task embodied the recommendations in Thomas (2010). It combined the study of visual texts with the poem. The intention behind providing a historical and modern image was to encourage the pupils to consider whether the way humans treat the environment had changed between the late 18th century and the 21st century, building on from the discussions in the previous lesson.

Tasks two and three were influenced by Lawrence (2019). Although this was not the pupils' first interaction with 'The Tyger', these strategies were an attempt to encourage their personal, creative responses to the poem whilst carefully giving them a platform to consider how Blake's poetry could be read through the lens of its own time period and how it may be received today. The question *"Does the poem relate to the sources we studied at the beginning of the lesson?"* was preferred to *"how does the poem relate to the sources we studied at the beginning of the lesson?"* as the latter implies that there is an inherent connection that I, as the teacher, wanted them to decipher. The former was an attempt to put the emphasis on the pupils' own readings of the poem. If they decided that they believed there was not a connection between 'The Tyger' and the visual sources, then that could have formed a discussion point for the lesson. However, in retrospect, this was an unhelpfully closed question. Although pupils did agree that the poem did relate to the visual sources and it did open discussion, had they have chosen to disagree, this could have limited progression.

The vlog activity was intended to be open ended, without referring to any media other than the format of a vlog itself. As Bowmer (2016) reminds us, when popular culture is integrated into lessons, a teacher's own preferences can undermine the pupils' interests. By referring solely to the vlog format, as opposed to any specific media or popular culture text, this task was designed to allow pupils to draw on their range of tastes in completing the task. As, in the previous session, pupils had related 'The Tyger' to their experience growing up in the 21st century, I wanted to use a format relevant to the 21st century for them to explore their ideas and make connections between both time periods.

The homework task was influenced by Bowmer (2016). I hoped to see how the pupils engaged with the study of Blake when given the opportunity to combine the poem with texts relevant to them. This was set as a homework task, with minimal instruction, so that there was no hierarchy created between the teacher's popular culture tastes and the interests of the pupils.

Responses to Guided Reflection

The following section outlines pupil responses to written, guided reflection that was undertaken away from the classroom, after teaching had occurred. These questions were chosen as I felt they put a personal response to the text at the heart of learning.

1) Visual Images

Guided reflection prompts:

How did you feel when viewing the images?

Did the images contribute to your understanding of the poem?

Pupil responses to the visual images indicated that it was an effective method of allowing them to develop their ideas from the previous session further. One pupil was struck "*by the comparable nature of the images, despite being from different centuries.*" They added that "*seeing images of the industrial revolution alongside images of modern methods of producing fuel proved to me the timeless nature of Blake's message.*"

Responses indicated that part of the success of this task was due to their prior knowledge and study of William Blake and his politics. When first presented with the task, pupils were “*looking out*” for themes and ideas that exist within Romantic poetry such as “*ideas concerning the natural world.*” They noted that this prior knowledge was beneficial as, without it, they may “*have recognised the images of the factories and industrialisation but not the contrast between nature and the human-made.*”

Pupils also expressed how the images triggered an emotional response. “*I felt aggrieved to see the destruction of the world through logging, overcrowding and air pollution.*” Another pupil claimed that “*when we talked about the images, I was disgusted at how the same issues still exist today.*”

There was a positive, but unintended, side effect of giving one group a modern image and one group a historical image. A pupil found that being initially distinct and separate from the other group’s picture and ideas made it shocking when they had to explain their readings of their images. It was a surprise “*the way both groups spoke of similar themes and noticed comparable details [...] of the way nature has been, and is still, exploited.*”

2) Reading the poem aloud

Guided reflection prompts:

How did you feel when hearing the poem read aloud?

What was the effect of having a chance to explore your ideas first, with 5 minutes reflection?

Responses to this brief activity were positive. The pupils already had prior knowledge of the poem but, nevertheless, re-reading the poem aloud still proved to be a worthwhile activity. One response claimed that “*It allowed me to reflect on my ideas from the previous week.*” For another, it was an opportunity to develop their ideas further. They said “*I came to the realisation that there are STILL different things you can explore in his poems,*” noting the

“comparison between the industry presented in the poem and the pictures” from the beginning of the lesson.

As the language and the imagery in ‘The Tyger’ is so ambiguous, the chance to hear the poem read aloud again was an opportunity to *“recognise the rhythm and the rhyme of the poem, which, in turn, helped to picture the images of the poem [...] the opportunity to read this aloud allowed me to tie the rhyme and sounds with the poem’s meaning.”*

This activity also appeared to facilitate the development of new ideas that had not been considered previously. One pupil claimed that *“despite the discussions in the previous lesson, I hadn’t realised before just how much industry is present in the poem.”* Throughout the activity itself, a pupil claimed that the speaker of the poem has a *“sort of morbid fascination with the power of industry”* adding that this was interesting because it *“lies in contrast to some of the attitudes shown throughout the rest of the collection.”*

3) Independent and grouped response to *“Does the poem relate to the sources we examined at the beginning of the lesson?”*

Guided reflection prompts:

How did posing this question affect your understanding of the poem?

There was a unanimous agreement that the visual images did relate to the content of ‘The Tyger.’ Perhaps, on reflection, this link was obvious, and the lesson was scaffolded in a way that did not really give pupils the opportunity to say that the poem did not relate to the visual sources. I believe remaining silent to see if the pupils made connections for themselves without any prompting may have been more powerful in allowing them to develop their ideas independently.

In response to the previous task, a pupil had highlighted the poem’s *“fascination with the power of industry.”* It would have been more effective to draw upon this comment in order to set up a debate about whether the visual sources, which clearly deride humanity’s destruction of the

natural world, do actually apply to the poem or whether the poem's speaker has any positive perceptions of industry.

However, posing this question did have some positives in achieving the lesson's objective. It allowed the class to directly link the content of the images with the content of the poem. The combination of visual imagery and Blake's poetic imagery *"helped me understand the poem's legacy and allowed me to picture its themes."* For example, how *"lines from the poem include 'burning bright' which links to the burning of wood present in the images we saw."* Another pupil claimed that this activity *"made me notice both the explicit and implicit connections between the poem and the 21st century."*

4) Creating Vlogs

Guided reflection prompts:

How did the vlog format affect your engagement with the poem?

When this task was explained and introduced, it produced audible sighs. One pupil muttered *"oh no, I'm not doing this!"* and described the task as *"the cringiest thing ever."* This scepticism was reflected in the responses to the guided reflection; several pupils approached this task with a degree of trepidation. For one pupil, it was *"like I was being pushed out of my comfort zone."* Despite this initial, fearful reaction to the task, pupils conceded that it was effective in bringing the relevance of Blake's work in to the 21st century. *"It was more effective than I initially imagined since I was able to think of multiple links to the present-day."* Another pupil claimed:

We explored themes including industry and the natural world, restricting systems that take away freedom and the idea that these issues will continue to spread, just as a fire. We borrowed ideas of nature, represented in the poem by the image of the natural 'tyger' itself, and the juxtaposition of the references to tools used in industry [...]. We also used theme of 'fire'; fire spreads and, in the poem, represents humans' inability to control the spread of industry and the destruction of the natural world.

For this pupil, the opportunity to use new media in creating a vlog was a catalyst in their engagement and development of their independent readings of the poems. It allowed the ideas established in the previous session to become more rounded and embedded. They had processed their knowledge of the poem and their knowledge of Blake's views on industry to bring his ideas in to the modern day. The fact they were able to draw upon Blake's attitudes towards the natural environment and industry and process them into the vlog format, indicates that this was a successful strategy for allowing them to develop their ideas about Blake's relevance to the 21st century, without the interference of a teacher.

The two groups were given the opportunity to develop and film their vlogs throughout the school and its grounds. One group chose to film in the middle of the school's field, as the pupil playing Blake commented on its natural beauty. They then juxtaposed this with an enraged portrayal of Blake, pointing towards murals of chimneys in the school's science department and some iron railings, proclaiming how humans had contorted and destroyed nature for their own benefit. In one example, the pupil portraying Blake expressed confusion at how God could allow fearsome animals like the tiger to exist, alongside the innocent lamb. Coincidentally, being a rural school, there were sheep in the field in the background of the video.

The second group produced another striking piece of work. A pupil adopted the persona of William Blake and stared out over the school's car park. They announced their disgust at how human made machines had impinged upon the once beautiful landscape "*eating up the God created Earth.*" They proceeded to go on and mimic kicking a radiator off the wall in rage at how humans persistently burned fuel to keep themselves warm at the expense of rising global temperatures. "*This,*" the pupil said in character as Blake, pointing towards the radiator "*is what will be our end.*"

Some commented on how the activity differed from normal teaching claiming that *“it was good to have a different style of lesson”* but acknowledged that *“if activities like this were done every lesson, it would be boring.”* Others embraced the freedom of the task. It *“allowed us to have agency in the poem. We were able to create our own interpretations of it.”*

In addition to the freedom the task facilitated, the class appreciated having the autonomy to carry out work within the school environment.

Using the school space allowed us to contrast the manmade with the natural, especially since we're a rural school [...] Even though we're in a rural school, in the middle of nowhere, the land around us has still been touched by human made constructs.

For this pupil, the ability to carry out this task outside of the classroom, in the school grounds, was a factor facilitating their engagement with the poem. Indeed, in carrying this task out, they had directly related Blake's poetry to their own experience and used it to inform their own, independent readings of the poem.

Responses indicated that the lesson also had a benefit on assessment. Pupils acknowledged that the lesson *“was useful in getting us to put the poem in to long term memory”* and that *“the moving images on our videos helped you remember stuff.”*

5) ‘The Tyger’ remix

Guided reflection prompts:

Why did you choose this text?

How carrying out this task for homework, rather than in the lesson, affect your learning?

Responses indicated that this activity was a worthwhile learning experience. Whilst it instructed the pupils to blend ‘The Tyger’ with modern text, one pupil chose to combine it with a biblical story, ‘The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.’ They indicated that in the Bible, *“The horsemen represent a change”* in the same way that Blake's poem *‘represents a change. Blake discusses how the speaker's view of God and creation has shifted after witnessing the Tyger.’*

Another pupil chose to blend ‘The Tyger’ with ‘Love Song to the Earth’ by Paul McCartney because “*themes of the environment and the oppression of the natural world are prevalent in the song.*” This pupil also made an explicit link between the in-lesson learning tasks and how this helped them complete the home learning effectively claiming that “*what we did in the vlog helped me complete this task further.*”

Whilst one pupil acknowledged that this task was different and memorable, which will help them understand the poem in “*exam situations,*” they also recognised that this task helped them understand and engage with the “*timelessness of literature.*”

Whilst this was a useful learning experience, pupils did express some concerns. They were worried that after the lesson they could ‘*only interpret the ‘The Tyger’ as a poem about destruction or rebellion.*’ Similarly, another pupil expressed how choosing to focus on the environment as a method of illustrating Blake’s legacy ‘*caused me to focus a lot on one particular interpretation [...] I may not be as confident when it comes to discussing other credible meanings.*’

Discussion

Whilst this study will form a useful starting point to consider the ‘next steps’ after Giovanelli and Mason (2015) and Lawrence (2019), it is not a set of stages or approaches to be followed rigorously. There were several competing tensions within the lesson, which were not all adequately met. Ultimately, the pupils were left hungry for more information which, regrettably, was not provided. They wished to know more about other, more traditional readings of Blake’s work in order to develop a more rounded and detailed understanding. Whilst I wanted to preserve independent responses and avoid being a ‘gatekeeper to meaning’ (Xerri, p.135), this finding shows how this approach was restrictive and not wholly appropriate for this lesson. Whilst a reader response approach be useful in underpinning the original lesson,

as it was in Lawrence (2019), and establishing the initial, personal responses to texts, the pupils' pre-existing knowledge of the Romantic movement and the poem itself led (as one pupil acknowledged) to their '*looking out*' for links to the Romantic movement when reflecting on the visual sources. This was not to their detriment, however. In looking out for these links, the pupils maintained their status as 'active readers' (Xerri, 2013, p.135) whilst reinforcing the knowledge required to perform successfully in the exam.

A pupil's observation that the atypical nature of the vlog task would help them remember the text in "*exam situations*" goes some way to deconstructing the binary between creative approaches to teaching and learning and their relevance to exams scenarios; memorable approaches to teaching and learning will stimulate academic curiosity which may influence exam performance. This finding is indicative of a need to develop approaches that respond to genuine, tangential thinking *and* uphold the rubric of exams. A follow up activity to this session may be to examine the history of interpretation of 'The Tyger' and how critics have interpreted Blake throughout history. This could go some way to reconciling pupils' own, divergent thinking and providing them with the knowledge needed to contextualise Blake's poem within both the time in which it was 'written' (AO3; Ofqual, 2014) and the time in which it was 'received' (AO3; Ofqual, 2014). It would situate the pupils' desire to explore their 21st century concern for climate change within a history of criticism, analysing how responses to Blake's poetry have altered throughout history, in response to societal changes and concerns.

Although the reader response basis of the lesson may have limited its outcomes, the lesson did appear to stimulate a genuine interest and investment in the poem. The task involving two images, provoked an emotional response to humanity's self-inflicted destruction of the Earth; one pupil felt disgusted and another felt "*aggrieved*." These findings support the propositions in Thomas (2010). They posit that teaching visual images alongside poetry helps to 'explore elements of a common cultural context' (p.92) between the text and the modern-day reader.

For the pupils in this study, not only have they appeared to understand the values of the text itself and how they relate to the modern day, but they have also connected with the text and images emotionally. By dispensing with the ‘teach to the test’ pedagogy that Cushing (2018) describes, this session was more engaging and provided variety as part of an A-Level curriculum.

The task of re-reading the poem aloud was effective in allowing the class to see the connections between Blake’s poem and the 21st century. One pupil’s claim that “*despite the discussions in the previous lesson, I hadn’t realised before just how much industry is present in the poem*” implies that this lesson deepened their thinking and allowed the tangent established in the first lesson to be explored in more detail. Furthermore, exploring a tangent developed by the class themselves allowed them to consider ‘The Tyger’s’ position within *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* as a pupil noted how the attitudes presented in the poem seem to lie “*in contrast*” to other parts of the collection. Potentially, the feeling of ownership and investment in this reading, facilitated by the design of the lesson allowed this pupil to make further connections across the collection.

The ‘remix’ task, borrowed from the approach used in Bowmer (2016), is built on the assumption that pupils will automatically engage with popular culture. Findings demonstrate how one pupil did engage with the opportunity to combine their own popular culture tastes with Blake’s poetry. However, findings also show how teachers should not assume that pupils will find tasks grounded in popular culture more interesting. One pupil drew on the Bible as a source of inspiration to illustrate how Blake’s ideas have existed throughout human history. Perhaps, even though the task was intended to be as free from instruction as possible, the instruction to blend ‘The Tyger’ with a modern text was itself too restrictive. Whilst this pupil had the initiative to pick a text that interested them, and go beyond the boundaries of the task, others may find difficulty in subverting their teachers’ instructions. Whilst borrowing the

approach used in Bowmer (2016) proved fruitful for one pupil, these findings demonstrate how teachers may need to be more flexible with their instructions and not assume that incorporating popular culture into lessons is automatically more appealing for pupils.

Conclusion

If we are to promote authentic readings of texts as an effective pedagogy in English studies, we must consider how teachers can respond to pupils' personal and creative responses to texts. We need to consider how we can hand learning over to pupils, yet still frame that learning to ensure their ideas are fully explored and valued.

The findings suggest that the theoretical approaches in previous studies, that have looked towards developing personal responses to texts at the first interaction, may not necessarily apply when a teacher plans further lessons to react to pupils' personal responses. This case study is, however, demonstrative of the power of embedding creativity into the teaching of canonical literature to the benefit of the pupils' own knowledge and intellectual curiosity.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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