

Introducing the Poetry Map



Embark with Matt Bryden on his free online teaching resource to encourage students to engage with poetry

What is it?

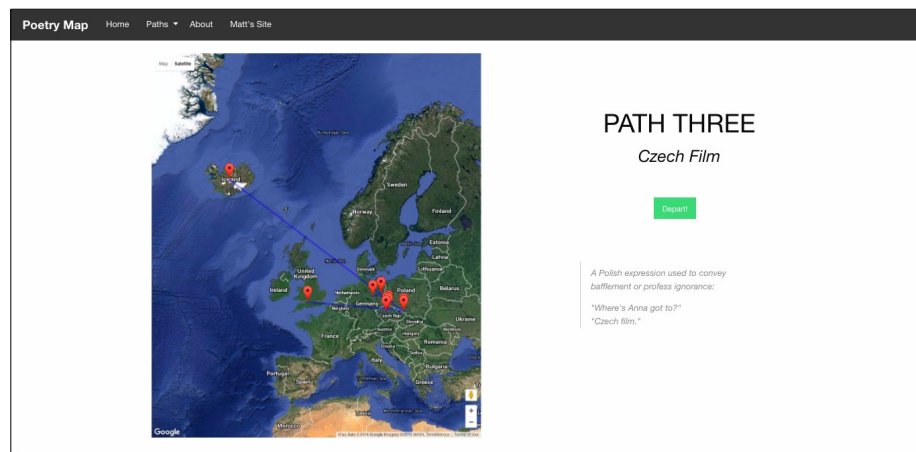
The Poetry Map consists of 67 poems each positioned on a map at the location of either its setting or composition. The poems are divided into four navigable ‘paths’ each with a different theme. Students navigate the paths answering questions about the poems.

History

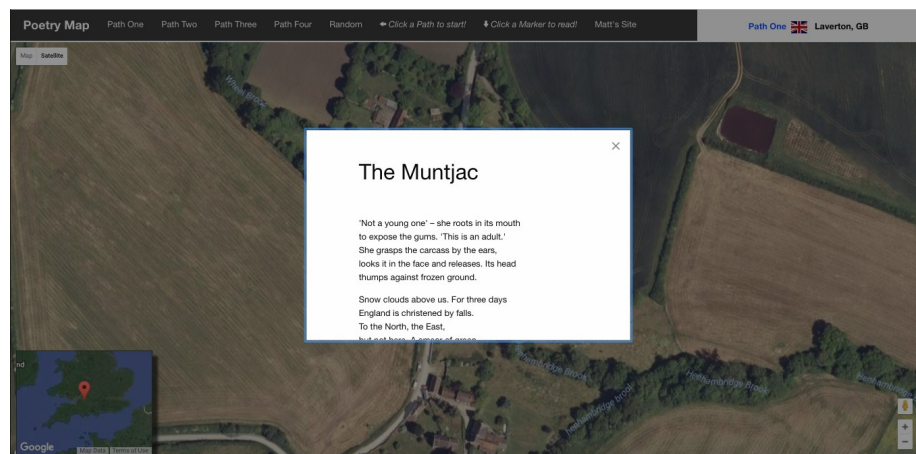
I first put some poems onto a digital map a few years ago. I had just published my first collection, and wanted somewhere for my ‘leftover’ poems to go. I entered the poems in little information boxes which I added to and re-ordered until they formed a kind of sequence of their own. I was amazed to find that without any publicity at all, it racked up over six thousand hits, for some reason mostly from China and Canada.

So I decided to take it a bit more seriously, replaced some of the weaker poems with new work, and developed the poems into four separate paths. Through a mutual friend, I was put in touch with Jon Munson II, a programmer from Maryland, and together we set about working out how to present the project to best effect. He devised a way of linking one poem to another, taking the reader on a journey across the map through the poems.

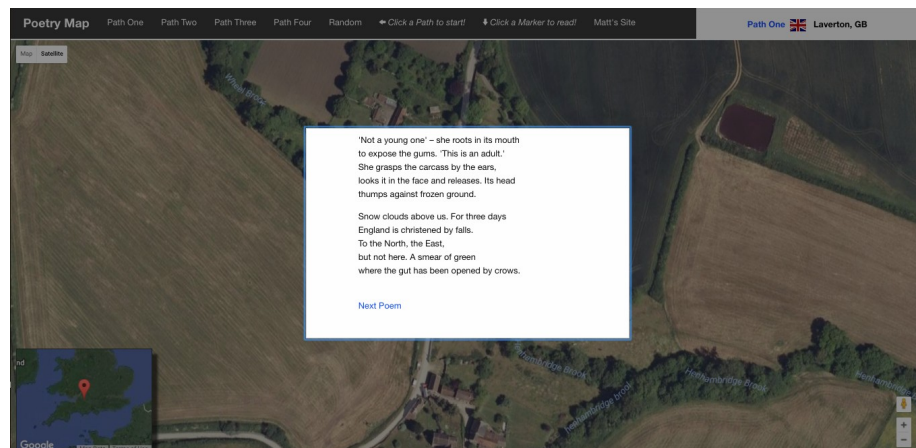
1. Choose a path



2 The poem appears



3 A link takes the reader to the next poem on the path



My main aim was to make each path readable, so that once one embarked one read to the end of the sequence in one go. This often meant discounting stronger poems which might have had pride of place in a printed collection. If a poem did not lend itself towards a 'scan and proceed' approach, and instead required the reader to linger, it had to go –

I did not want poems that halted one's movement along the path. This meant that the poems tend towards the narrative and, with exceptions, are fairly brief. I suppose that in one sense, too, a strong poem needs to be independent of any other stimuli, and too much information will cause the two to clash. A lot of my initial feedback from other writers went along the lines of, 'I went through all four paths in one sitting.' That is exactly what I had aimed for.

However, I was also aiming for a readership who would not necessarily describe themselves as poetry readers. Thus, it was heartening to receive an email from a professor at California University telling me she had just used the map in a lesson with her students. On Poetry Day 2016, I received another email out of the blue telling me that students had been using the map closer to home at a middle school in Somerset. This sent alarm bells ringing, as the content is a little risqué in places.

I now saw that this had the potential to be a good teaching resource, although perhaps with an age restriction, and decided to work on making it a more constructive site. To my mind it had five main benefits for students:

- 1 The poems were 'authentic texts' which meant that they did not pander or talk down in any way. Students who accessed the map would become immersed in a sequence of poems in which not everything was crystal clear, and which they needed to learn to navigate. Ultimately, this might lead to an interest in poetry, and a confidence in reading work which engages in 'negative capability.'
- 2 An attractive interface might lead students to read poetry by stealth (ie before there is a chance to say 'I don't like poetry').
- 3 The originality of the idea, and method of navigation, might appeal to students who could see themselves as detectives solving clues.
- 4 It was accessible all around the world.
- 5 Readers might be particularly interested in poems about parts of the world with which they were familiar or interested in.

As a writer, I also saw the benefit of grouping the poems in such a way. In 2010, I had set a poetry pamphlet entirely within a hotel. This meant that I did not have to use the word 'hotel' in every poem, since it was understood. The same was true of a series of poems set in Poland, say. The map provided context, and moving across it gave a sense of progression.

Further, the visual aspect of the map was often appealing in its own right. Like most people, I find maps inherently fascinating, and the poem 'Imagine a Forest' gains something from appearing against the dense green background of Brejlov in the Czech Republic, just as 'The Westbury Horse' appears beside its own striking white emblem.

Jon Munson II worked very hard to make navigation of the site as intuitive as possible. We took advantage of the opportunity to include little extras which a physical book would not afford, introducing a number of clickable 'Magic Tickets' which revealed audio files of a poem, music, images, draft copies and so forth.

I then created free downloadable worksheets for teachers and students to make the resource as accessible and inviting as could be.

Once the site was up and running, I decided to trial it.

Trials

Trial 1 *12th December 2016*

The first trial took place with a class of nine year eleven students at Taunton International School, England. They were second language students, which meant that intelligibility of the poems was an issue.

In presenting the project, I wanted to put myself in the situation of a teacher in another country who did not have my own knowledge of the map, to see if the basic concept worked. I broadly outlined the idea, put the students in pairs and gave them a worksheet with instructions.

Each pair completed the first path within one hour. (One hour seems to be the cut-off point for students focusing on a computer screen without becoming distracted). We then went through the worksheet to check answers and discuss their experience before I handed out feedback forms. The responses recorded that seven students had enjoyed working on the map, while one said they had enjoyed the discussion afterwards, and one said 'It didn't really keep my attraction.' When it came to 'Is there anything you didn't like?' the consensus was that 'The language was too difficult' which was a barrier for their engagement with the project. On the plus side, I was pleased that in the 'What did you like best about it?' section, the key attraction of the Poetry Map had been recognized: 'The idea of travelling on a map and discovering stories at the

same time.’ Afterwards, a student said to me, ‘It was the best English lesson ever. It was something different.’

While the lesson did go well, I also saw that the students benefited from my knowledge and help. A teacher would have to possess the same knowledge of the poems as I did to be able to assist their progress through the poems. I consequently rewrote the notes for teachers and clarified the student instructions.

Trial 2 *19th January 2017*

The second trial was with nine year eleven students whose first language was English. This time they completed Path 2.

With the first language students and the revised worksheets, feedback was much more positive. With one exception, all the students said they had enjoyed working on the map. Comments included:

‘I felt kind of like a detective working on a case.’

‘It was an enjoyable experience that really made me put on my thinking cap.’

‘It was interesting to see the places the poems are talking about.’



‘I felt kind of like a detective working on a case.’

This first comment was what I had been after – to create an information gap for students to attempt to fill. Another student wrote that they had enjoyed ‘Find[ing] the clues, like poems that contain a girl’s name.’

The most telling part of the lesson was with a couple of students who seemed to lack confidence. One of them asked me a question about the poem ‘Exam Conditions.’ In the third stanza, a class of examinees are compared to birds. One of the students had written on her worksheet that this is because they were fast, and wanted to know if this was right. I thought this was interesting, as although it was true, context suggests this is not what the poem is getting at. Rather, the examinees in the poem displayed themselves like birds – taking out their phones, putting on and taking off their jackets. One of the girls did not like the fact there was not a black and white answer to the question. Later on, I told the same pair that I would be very interested to hear their interpretation of another poem, ‘The Example.’ This is a poem in which very little is stated. The poem comes in a sequence of teaching poems, so it might be assumed that the narrator and subject are both at a school.

The Example

I haven't told a soul, but
since Hidemi's disclosure
she looks a little different –
like her hair has been rinsed this morning
and left to fall forward
over her eyes.

I feel a little guilty
as though implicit in my knowledge
were a design.
Little does she know
I would no more take her in my arms
now than before.

Hidemi bounces on the trampoline,
her high voice coming
through the library window.
If I were light like that,
voice stretched, extended and
sounding each bounce –

I would clap a covering hand,
slide my feeling
into a shirt-pocket,
return to my usual gait,
head down. I crane
my neck towards her voice.

The same girl who had stated discomfort at the lack of yes / no answers wrote on her worksheet that she believed Hidemi was a student who had 'come out', and that this made the narrator feel uncomfortable and question themselves. I asked her how she had come to this conclusion, and she said it was principally the strong connotations of the word 'disclosure.' I was amazed that she had learned to navigate the uncertain milieu of these poems and come to an intuitive conclusion based on the evidence before her. I was also pleased that her confidence had grown during the space of the hour to the point where she was able to present her idea to the class.

In practical terms, it also became clear that a better navigation system was required once students had completed reading through the poems in a path. A pull-down menu giving easy access was needed, but one that was only accessible after reading through the poems. I did not want to strip the sequence of its unique interface.

In the discussion afterwards, I asked the students to create similes and metaphors describing the poetry map:

The Poetry Map is like time spent on a warm summer evening

The Poetry Map is a never-ending dream

The Poetry Map is like being on a journey

Trial Three *19th January 2017*

The final trial to date also took place at Taunton International School with a class of 10 year eleven students with English as a first language. They embarked on the third path.

This was probably the most successful trial, with students responding to the concept strongly: 'It was unlike anything I've ever seen.' 'It was different from just reading the poems. This made it interesting.' 'The poems were intriguing, as was trying to interpret them.' All 10 students wrote that they enjoyed working on the map.



They listed the things they liked best:

‘To find the different poems on different places in the map. To think about the meaning and learn new vocabulary.’

‘I liked how there was a location with every poem, and it was like a story.’

‘It was a new and fresh idea.’

‘The idea of virtual travel all over the world with the writer.’

‘The atmosphere of Eastern Europe.’

‘How the poems have hidden meanings.’

The final question on the feedback form was: ‘Overall, has your interest in poetry increased or decreased?’ In each trial, the majority of answers read ‘increased’ with a few remaining unchanged. However, perhaps the question should read, ‘Has your confidence in reading poetry increased?’

One student wrote:

[My interest] has increased. I’ve never really liked writing poetry because I’m not too great at it, but I enjoyed reading the poems with the addition of the maps and tickets.

The Next Step

Creating the Poetry Map has taught me a lot about the potential of a website that will operate in my absence, as well as the difficulties involved. I now intend to create a lively and fun site for teaching children the rudiments of poetry – meter, rhyme, forms etc – based on courses I have taught across the South West of England in recent years. The difference being that this time I will write poems specifically to illustrate each teaching point, and students will be able to store their progress each time they revisit the site so they can resume where they left off.

Watch this space!

For help in researching this article thanks are due to teachers Jo Chaffey and Jill Phillips, as well as Taunton International School

Matt Bryden has over ten years' experience of EFL teaching. He is a teacher for the Poetry Society and runs the Somerset Young Poets Competition.

*Access the Poetry Map at:
mattbrydenpoetry.co.uk*