

# AUSTRALIAN POETRY AND THE CLASSROOM

by Bonny Cassidy and Johanna Featherstone

Since 2007, The Red Room Company has been developing *Papercuts*, a national poetry program for secondary schools. Currently funded by the Ian Potter Foundation and generous individuals, this program has been designed with assistance from professional educators and piloted over three years in a variety of classrooms. Approaching from the literary and creative arts industry rather than from the education sector, this article reflects on what *Papercuts* has discovered about teaching Australian poetry in our schools. Specifically, it highlights how the program has tested the importance of live performance, non-text forms and the original creation of poems in teaching and learning English; and what is needed to secure a more widespread adoption of creative practice in the national English classroom.

The Red Room Company was founded in 2003 and runs an annual program of public poetry projects. We commission, present, publish and promote new work by a broad range of contemporary Australian poets, focusing on younger and emerging talents, and increasingly reaching out to regional areas. Each of our projects features a live event including performance, installation, handmade objects and combinations of text with design, illustration and visual art. Many of our projects, like "Pigeon Poetry" (2008) and "Dust Poems" (2009) are about getting a wide audience, especially non-arts communities, excited about and involved with contemporary poetry. *Papercuts* was developed as a way of extending the novelty and outreach aspects of our projects, to the classroom.

There is no other program like this, in Australia.

## The program: an overview

To shape the *Papercuts* program, we teamed up with Tony Britten, a well-regarded educator and English teacher at SCEGGS Darlinghurst. Tony advised us on the urgent needs of English teachers in NSW and around the country, who are faced with Australian literature units and poetry units. What he told us, many of you will know but it is worthwhile reiterating the facts because they are astonishing to us as readers and writers: there is no federal or state poetry education program outside the syllabi; there is not yet a federal or state arts residency program for schools, although The Hon. Peter Garrett, Minister for Environment, Heritage and the Arts, is currently talking about addressing this; many teachers feel ill at ease with poetry as a form, and with instigating critical analysis of poetry; students' creative writing

has no formal place in the states' curricula until senior years, and then only selectively; there is no curricular opportunity for inter-disciplinary work, e.g. between English and Visual Arts, Music or Design classes.

The niche for our program was more like a gaping hole. With Tony's counsel, we pinpointed Years 9 and 10 as the stage most likely to benefit from *Papercuts*: the students have had some exposure to Australian literature; there is a poetry unit to cover and time to explore it flexibly; the middle years introduce students to the possibility of senior Extension and creative English work; and the age group is experimental but not yet too-cool-for-school. For Red Room, the program's two priorities were funding intensive visits to the classroom by live poets, and creating an environment in which students would write, workshop and present their own poetry. To us, the two are inextricably linked and mutually absent from mainstream secondary English classes. How can most kids conceive of writing as a viable activity and profession, without seeing a living, breathing poet – one who lives in their area and is still developing their own oeuvre? How can they start writing without the dedicated time and space to do so; and without a supportive peer environment that helps them read and hone their work? How can the wider community see what kids are writing without performances and exhibitions of their poems?

By emulating one of our past projects, the *Papercuts* program would pair each school with a poet from that project and preferably from the school's region. The school would be sent a sample of the poet's work in advance. Over at least three visits, the poet would talk to the class about their experience of the project and of writing poetry, and lead workshops of the students' individual or group writing. The chosen project would provide a theme for the students' work, which they would polish for a live event in their school and/or community. Students would create a physical and performative presentation of their poems for an audience.

Seeking the advice of Tony and other NSW and interstate educators, we also defined a third priority for the program, based on the needs of teachers. If the program was to really do its job, it needed to be as flexible and efficient for teachers as possible; in other words, we had to deliver something that was at the same time prêt à porter and bespoke. We would accompany the poet's visits with a teachers' kit of activities that formed its own poetry unit. Teachers could decide to what extent they would use the kit to support their class workshops. Tony

would write the kit around the theme of the chosen Red Room project. We decided which of our public projects would translate best to the classroom. "The Cabinet of Lost and Found" was our first choice. It was a national project created for The Sydney Writers' Festival 2006, and featured poets including Emily Ballou (NSW) and Alicia Sometimes (VIC). Their handwritten poems were displayed in an old folding magician's box with tagged relics and photographs donated by each poet.

What better way to get kids connecting with poetry, than to get them to explore responses to secret spaces, lost objects and identities, talismanic possessions, curios, and found poetry; and to interpret the concept of a physical "cabinet" to display the poetry?



### The program: putting it into practice

In our pilot year, 2007, we worked with a number of teachers who had come forward through our contacts in the education sector. This allowed us to encounter a spectrum of schools and trial the intended versatility and accessibility of the program. Classes we worked with included a regional Catholic school in Yass, a private girls' college at Abbotsleigh, and a mostly male, first-generation Australian class at Penrith High School, led by Mark Howie, head of AATE. What we discovered, happily, was what we had anticipated – the pilot sessions highlighted the thirsty demand for interactive literary and local content in secondary English. At about the same time, the Australia Council's roundtable discussion about Australian Literature and the national syllabus took place. Its results and those of our own field work presented much the same conclusion: that an improved English curriculum could include more scope for recognised formal units of Australian literature; and that creative expression could be drawn into the teaching and learning of English as a subject.

Furthermore, *Papercuts* had established a template for a national approach to these needs: its basis in creative expression creates a common teaching and learning language between Excel classes in Victoria, disabled and special needs students, and Gifted and Talented or GAT classes. The visiting poet's presence becomes the catalyst – and licence – for students to consider their own aesthetic and literary values. The poet's immediacy allows discussions of process and concept that invite students to critically assess their habits of writing and reading their own work and others. Poet, Anna Kerdijk-Nicholson, visited Abbotsleigh for *Papercuts* in 2008, and described the trajectory undertaken by the students:

The best was witnessing the manifestations of poetry that the girls came out with. There were two 'ability groups' - the lower ability group didn't understand what poetry was 'for' in the beginning but the product from the groups was indistinguishable in quality and verve at the end. My chest nearly exploded with pride when they volunteered to stand up and 'perform' their work in front of their peers and accept public feedback from me. It was awesome to watch the growth and development with even the small influence from me...

For these students, the poem becomes something to inhabit – an active space but also one of self-awareness. This plays into secondary students' existing assertion and exploration of identity, but it also establishes a framework with which they can assess poetry encountered in the syllabus. Arguably, a kid will be better able to approach and understand poetic form through their own memory of composition, than through the formal experience of reading only.

In the case of special needs groups at Mt Carmel School in Yass and, later, at Belmont High School north of Sydney, *Papercuts*' cross-disciplinary approach to poetry embraced the students' varied demands, abilities and focus levels. At Belmont in 2008, Newcastle poet Ivy Ireland used her performative and musical experience to catch the kids' attention and convey language to them through colour and sound. The group produced a suite of works on a landscape theme, combining small and deftly painted images with imagistic poems, and intimate boxes or mini-cabinets containing stanzas of a sequence. At Abbotsleigh, the visual approach to presenting poetry met with technology to create a Powerpoint "cabinet" that could be sent to Kerdijk-Nicholson once the unit was done. Abbotsleigh has also established an intranet communication for future *Papercuts* sessions, allowing a virtual poet "residency" and inter-school exchange that provide extra critique time outside of limited class visits.



As an external program, *Papercuts* is not assessable; this makes it a unique experience of English study – a relief from students’ and teachers’ adherence to set learning outcomes, but more than “play” or “time-out” as it feeds directly back into classroom and examination performance. Participating teachers have described how *Papercuts* has exposed poetry as a vehicle for immediate and otherwise difficult or impossible communication between teachers and students. Moreover, it’s a way of connecting students with a real world of contemporary writing, publishing and reading audiences in Australia. Several *Papercuts* poets and teachers describe students’ reverent and genuine response to the visiting poets’ own practice, and the sense of camaraderie that is naturally built in a workshop environment.

In 2008, the program also extended to Victoria, in order to pilot its relevance interstate. At Fitzroy High School, teacher Briony O’Keeffe remarked on the importance of the program’s public conclusion, to give gravitas to the act of writing and the awareness of audience, “to get them to conceive of an end ‘product’ which they could exhibit and present to their friends and families.” And as parent Steve Hope commented: “A group of young people had become so engaged with their own learning that they were able to express it powerfully, creatively and generously.” Surely a respect for poetic form and practice nurtured in school can lead to a greater and much-needed awareness of the form in Australian public life.

### Development and future of the program

Fitzroy High School returned to *Papercuts* in 2009, including many of the previous year’s students who had moved into Year 10 Excel English. This time, the students

advanced their interpretation of the program by taking their poetry to the wider community. Fitzroy decided to use our new project kit, “Toilet Doors Poetry”. The original project was run nationally in 2004 and 2006, and featured poets like Andrew Slattery, Liz Allen, Ed Wright and Michael Brennan. The project made their poems into illustrated posters, which were distributed in packs and displayed inside cubicle doors in Qantas domestic terminals and Greater Union cinemas around the country. “Toilet Doors” provides an opportunity for students to consider how poetry relates and fits – literally and metaphorically – into their school space; and, in turn, how the school space can be transformed and opened up by doing so.

Fitzroy’s students decided to emulate the “Toilet Doors Poetry” posters and to distribute these to public restrooms of local businesses in Melbourne. What a pleasant surprise it was to turn up for the Baader Meinhof Complex at Westgarth Cinemas in Carlton and find brightly illustrated poems including “Cubicle of Hidden Whispers”: “Silent. / Silent cubicle of brooding / concentration. / Plumbing. / Plumbing marked and fractured / by neglect. / Cold. / Stony cold of an old air / conditioner. Water.” As well as appearing on 3RRR, the Fitzroy class devised a group pantoum with their poet, Lisa Gorton (“Toilet Doors Poetry” 2008), and are planning to publish it in a literary journal this year. The quite brilliant quality of the poem prompts questions about our valuing of young adults’ creative work, particularly that work created outside of assessable frameworks such as process diaries and statements of influence. At Fitzroy, *Papercuts* created a space in which abstract but serious, rigorous but unlimited writing

process could take place. As one Fitzroy student, Joe, commented, "People think poetry can be anything, but you've really got to sit down and think about it. Before this idea, I was really, like, 'Just get the poem, one look at it, get it out there'. But I've become more into a whole lot of drafting and fine-tuning".

In 2010 schools and learning institutions across the country will participate in our program including The Sydney Conservatorium of Music and Dillwynia Correction Centre in NSW. We are also building a new unit of work featuring our 'Sea Things' project which collaborated with poets and the maritime industry to write poems about the sea and to take these poems, by boat, to Tagai State College, on Thursday Island.

"The program helps", as Mark Howie wrote in support of *Papercuts* in 2007, "to imagine if not a life in writing, at least a life with and through writing"; at the other end, it fosters a generation of individuals who may be contributing to Australia's contemporary literary or critical fields in future. Later in 2010, we will be taking the program to Norfolk Island, where the remote student community will be presenting their work at the

island's annual arts festival and infiltrating its student-run radio station and newspaper. To get the original work produced within *Papercuts* out and beyond the classroom is to effect mainstream perceptions and presence of Australian poetry. If a generation of young adults are allowed to accept poetic form as they accept mathematical vocabulary, and see the work of contemporary poets amongst the world of law, labour, design or makeup artistry, "Australian poetry" stops being a distant, irrelevant or somewhat ridiculous concept and becomes a familiar if not vital part of the community.

**For further information**

Visit [www.redroomcompany.org](http://www.redroomcompany.org) or email [Johanna@redroomcompany.org](mailto:Johanna@redroomcompany.org) (w) 02 9319 5090

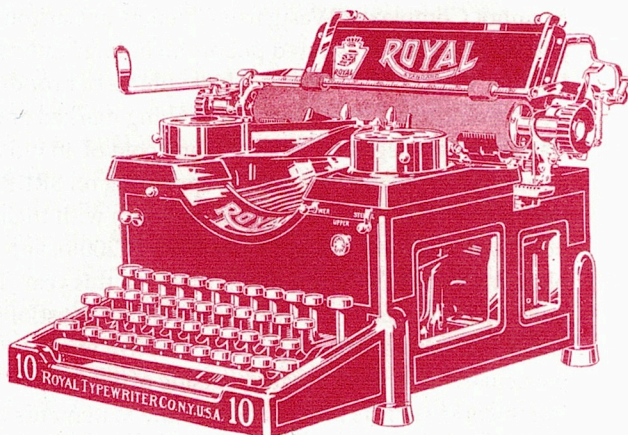
The author of the poem-poster is Imogen Moore, a Year 9 student from Fitzroy High, VIC,

The student photographed is Tilly Hope, from Fitzroy High, VIC who participated in Cabinet of Lost and Found, when she was in Year 8.

# Try this...

"Go" is the shortest sentence in the English language. (An imperative intransitive can stand alone). A verb is the best place to start a poem because action is the magic word.

We have all been poems. We have all acted. So how will we write the next poem?  
Here is what the poet Anslem Hollo wrote.



**Pomology**

An apple a day  
is 365 apples.  
A poem a day  
is 365 poems.  
Most years.  
Any doctor will tell you  
it is easier to eat an apple  
that to make a poem.  
It is also easier  
to eat a poem  
than to make an apple  
but only  
just. But here  
is what you do  
to keep the doctor  
out of it: publish a poem  
on your appletree.  
Have an apple  
In your next book.

p.128. HOROVITZ, Michael (ed.)  
Children of Albion: poetry of the  
'Underground' in Britain, Penguin, 1969.

**Follow his advice and write your next poem.  
(Victor Davidson)**