GETTY

Learning (a)verse

For decades, the practice of pupils committing poetry to memory has been deeply unfashionable. But **Debbie Pullinger**, currently part of a Cambridge research study into the matter, argues that memorisation coupled with analysis can bring about a fuller, more emotional and intellectual appreciation

Can you recite a poem by heart? There's no shame if you can't. Practising teachers are now, largely, the generation that passed through school without learning a single poem. Although memorisation was, for centuries, the accepted way of inculcating a knowledge of poetry, it ceased to be a statutory school requirement in 1944. And so began its steady decline: recitation faded out, rote learning fell from favour and the emphasis shifted to close reading and analysis of the poem on the page.

Within wider society, the recited poem took on a rather different set of meanings. It became something of a party piece, rolled out at weddings and funerals; a cultural signpost signifying a certain type of education; an exercise in remembrance, keeping the past alive.

For many teachers, getting children to learn poetry by heart seems like an outdated and pointless exercise at best. The mixed reaction to the new statutory requirement for memorisation and recitation on the primary English curriculum, and to the reinstatement of closed-book English exams at GCSE with the implied obligation to learn at least a few lines, indicates just how much has changed.

The primary programmes of study do not supply the rationale for getting children to learn poetry, though the stated aim of ensuring that all pupils "appreciate our rich, literary heritage" is presumably part of it. Memorisation and recitation may be back on the curriculum, but their exact relationship with the existing requirements for appreciation and analysis have not been properly articulated.

So does learning and reciting a poem make any difference to the way we engage with and understand it?

Conventional literary criticism will have us pore over the poem on the page, map out its metre, unravel its rhyme scheme, interpret its images and then explain what the poet was trying to achieve. Could moving it from page to memory help with any of this?

Certainly, there are those – literary scholars among them – who believe it does. In her commentary on Shakespeare's sonnets, critic Helen Vendler says that she found it essential to learn them all by heart to arrive at her understandings. And from our work on the Cambridge Poetry and Memory Project, we believe that memorisation and recitation both have a vital and distinctive role to play in the study of poetry.

As part of our three-year investigation, we conducted an online survey to find out which poems people in the UK now know, and about their experience of having them committed to memory; 500 people responded. We then conducted more than 30 follow-up in-depth interviews (see box, page 32).

Our survey data indicates that having some poetry in our memory offers a constellation of potential benefits. It can be an emotional resource and a way of making sense of life – "crystallising the reality of things in all their complexity", as one poetry enthusiast put it. It can give us confidence in our own memories and an ear for language – what Seamus Heaney called "bedding the ear with a kind of linguistic hardcore".

But the most universal effects seem to be related to experience of the poem itself. Deeper appreciation and increased understanding were consistently regarded as two of the most valuable aspects – coming first and third overall respectively in a ranking exercise, either side of "it provides comfort in tough times".

This statistic is supported by the personal accounts. For a few people – such as the doctoral student who memorises the poems she studies – critical insight is the motivation for learning. "I never fully appreciate a poem until I have learned it," someone else agreed. But circumstances and reasons for memorising are very diverse, including "accidental" learning – poems that "just went in" from being read or heard a lot.

Many people become aware of their deepening comprehension over time and a poem learned in childhood may unfold its meaning after many years, often after a major change in circumstance or experience. So, if memorisation does have the potential to create a deeper understanding of the poem, why should that be the case? How does it work?

It appears several factors are in play. A relatively straightforward one is that we often feel a stronger sense of ownership of a learned poem: "It's not 'mine' in any literal sense, but I feel I have a 'claim' to it because I've taken the trouble to learn it," said one interviewee. And we know from psychology that simply having invested time and energy in something means we are more likely to attribute significance to it.

Equally, many people learn poems with which they feel a strong emotional connection. A poem that speaks to my state of love or loss is also likely to draw me into deeper appreciation and engagement.

But memorisation also works in more direct ways and in synergy with the particular properties of poetry. Here are some of the most significant.

1. Involving the voice, activating the acoustic

The roots of poetry are in oral culture, where appeal to the ear and memory are critical to performance. Typically, a poem's structure works sympathetically with the human voice and memory. In giving voice to verse, you feel its rhythms in your body, your breath flowing through its lines. Shakespeare knew as much and expressed it in the final couplet of Sonnet 18 – a poem that ranked third in our survey:

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee

In speaking those lines aloud, we feel the breath running through the repeated, elongating, life-extending "ee" vowels. We are momentarily pulled up short by the vocal attention we are forced to give "lives" and "this", which makes for a tiny interruption to the smooth iambic line. We might even feel, if subliminally, a faint, deathly echo from a similar halting effect three lines earlier:

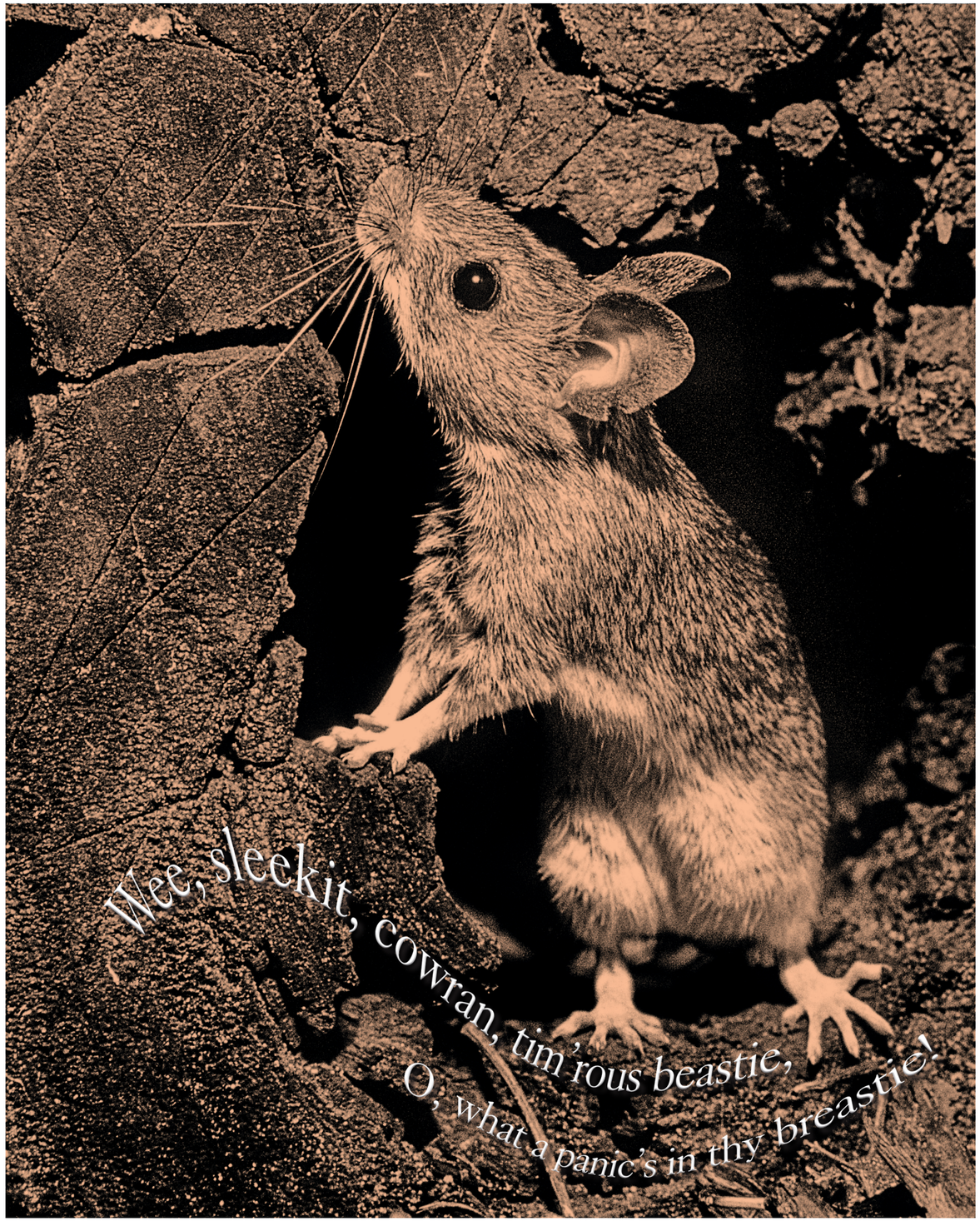
Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade

In our literate culture, however, we are used to seeing poems on the page. The contours of the print reflect aspects of the poem's form, and these guide our mental navigation (even when reciting from memory, for some). But words on the page have a certain homogeneity that flattens out their rhythms and masks their vocal dynamics. Paradoxically, text lacks texture.

We know, moreover, that visual stimuli tend to trump auditory ones. This means that though printed words are a necessary cue to performance, they also act as a kind of interference. That's one reason why hearing a poem without sight of the text can be a revelation. Our mind is free to attend to tasks other than decoding and our mind's eye is free to roam. Putting the book down is perhaps like taking the stabilisers off the bike. You may be a bit wobbly at first, but only then can you really feel the way the bike is moving over the surface; only then can you find your balance.

2. Memorable speech

When we "read" the poem from memory, the layer of cognitive processing required for decoding print is lifted away. We still have to retrieve and reconstruct the poem, but the hooks by which we haul those out of memory are poetic devices. Stanza and line, metre and rhyme – all are sympathetic to the functions and constraints of both working and long-term memory. This is not to detract from



GETTY

REX

their integral role in the sense and artistry of the poem. But since remembering requires close attention to shapes and sounds, it also activates the very qualities that make poetry, as Auden put it, "memorable speech". In Shakespeare's couplet, the repetition of "So long", the consonance of its key words and the close proximity of its end rhymes all make the sense echo through the sound, just as they make the move from the first to the second line an easy one.

3. The inner room

Once a poem has been taken off the page and into the mind and body, there is often a shift in the way it is experienced. Some people articulate this as feeling as if they are on the inside of the poem. The memorised stanza (Italian for "room") becomes like a room or landscape that they are free to wander around and explore. "I know the poem so well that I don't have to think about it, and then I can sort of play around inside it, and different shades and meanings come to you," said one participant.

Inhabiting the poem, experiencing the poem as an internal space, we become more aware both of the structure as a whole and of the constructed pathway that pulls us along. "It's as if it were a landscape that I had to navigate with my eyes closed, learning where the dips and climbs were and what outcrops to avoid," said another.

This transformation seems to become possible only once the poem is in our memory – perhaps because the whole and its parts are simultaneously present to us, and because the sensory qualities, as well as the imagery and other associations, have become more immediate.

Rhyme and reason

As part of the University of Cambridge research, people were asked which of these options most closely matched their experience of knowing a poem – they could select as many as they wanted.

Knowing a poem by heart ...	
Helps you appreciate the poem more	72%
Is source of comfort in tough times	63%
Helps you understand the poem better	56%
Is good for being able to play with language	54%
Helps you to make sense of life	44%
Is good for making connections between things	42%
Gives confidence that you can remember things generally	40%
Helps with being able to express ideas	39%
Makes no difference	3%

4. The rewards of the journey

It is not only the firm possession of a complete poem that has this potential; the process of acquisition can be similarly rewarding. There are various ways to memorise a poem, including "rote learning", a term used to denote a rather mechanistic, superficial process that attends to the form, but not so much to the meaning. Some people find that poems learned by rote do unfold their meaning later – perhaps much later. But our research indicates that this approach is less likely to produce a lasting relationship with the poem. It is very much a means to an end and isn't particularly rewarding in itself.

More productive for both result and reward is a heuristic approach, in which the learning is a process of discovery. This deep, organic learning is characterised by a full engagement with a poem's sensory qualities: its sounds, its feel in the mouth. We become aware of the poem's effects on our body and our emotion. And rather than using memory "techniques", we might discover the poem's own inbuilt mnemonics. Crucially, there is patient, deep attention to the poem itself; the objective is appreciation rather than memorisation. Paradoxically, the memorisation probably happens faster and with less effort.

This approach is more of a disposition than a method. It's a space in which everything – even forgetting – becomes instructive. Vendler says that the parts of the sonnets she forgot were often those that, once retrieved, revealed something significant: "Those gaps made me realise that some pieces of the whole must not yet have been integrated into my understanding of the intent of the work... Recovery of the missing pieces brought with it a further understanding of the design of that sonnet."

5. Recitation as interpretation

If the memorisation required by the primary curriculum is unfamiliar territory for some, recitation is probably more so. But the idea that recitation could be a valid form of literary interpretation is one that had considerable currency within the verse-speaking movement in the middle of the last century. Don Geiger, one of its proponents in the US, observed "it would be merely silly to think of the oral interpreter as the ideal reader who understands everything. Nor should we think that the oral interpreter can supersede the textual critic...but we may notice that in reproducing effects of the text itself, the oral interpreter approaches the literary work even more closely than the textual critic."

Even if a poem is never recited formally, giving our own voice and body to the lines draws us more fully into the meaning-making. "You cannot recite a poem without giving something of yourself to the utterance," said one interviewee. "It is important to recite the lines aloud...and to emphasise them in different ways in order to explore sounds and meanings." We may even find that our voice has made its own response to a line: an unexpected inflection, a change of rhythm, an altered tone that offers up a fresh interpretation.

Possibilities of meaning are opened up by performance dynamics and these in turn seem to be further activated by a sense of audience. "Reciting poetry," another participant said, "is an exciting thing. There is direct contact between you and the listener."

An orientation towards sharing, even with an imagined audience, seems to bring the relationship between sound and sense automatically into sharper focus.

The case for learning poems as a source of consolation, cultural enrichment and even confidence is being well made. The case for its potential in pedagogy has barely been opened. And neither aspect has really been researched. Indeed, there has been hardly any investigation into the cognitive and psychological dynamics of poetry experience, as compared with music, for example.

Our own project is only a small start, but the evidence from it points strongly towards memorised poetry being a resource with the potential to enrich people's lives in many ways, both emotional and intellectual, over many years. It appears, moreover, that memorisation, recitation, appreciation and analysis are in fact all aspects of the same experience, with each having the potential to enhance all the others. And if this is the case, memorisation and recitation should not be regarded as a sideshow, but central to the teaching of poetry.

Dr Debbie Pullinger is junior research fellow at Wolfson College, University of Cambridge. Read more information about the project at poetryandmemory.com