

# Why Business Universities Should Teach Poetry



**ENGLISH PRACTICE** – Comment: **‘What’s poetry got to do with profit?’**, one might ask. SWZ feature writer Geoff Barclay poses the question and looks at ways in which a module or two of poetry in a Business Studies degree might produce a more rounded and self-sufficient business person once he or she is released on the world at large.

**Bolzano/Liverpool** – Nonsense. Nonsense it would seem to advocate that some of our finest brains, intent on making their way in the world of business, should have to contemplate poetry during their studies.

Well, let us analyse what is meant in this proclamation before coming to any **rash** judgement. Furthermore, let us understand what would tempt a feature writer to approach such a subject. Maybe best to approach the second aspect first. The writer is not alone in becoming increasingly frustrated by the ways of the world – the talk of **‘spread’**, the **fallout from** any attempted political movement, the constant struggle to decipher markets, the **relentless** efforts to score a hit and win big. The world of the yuppie seems to be the playing field of one and all in business nowadays and the emphasis is on striking it rich in an instant.

**Organisations may pronounce their vision and their mission but they do so without any attention to values**

Interesting it is to look up the definition of ‘yuppie’: a young person who lives in a city, earns a lot of money, and spends it doing fashionable things and buying expensive possessions. The word comes from the acronym YUP – young, **upwardly**-mobile, professional.

At times it would appear that the whole world is in some sort of frenzied state, convinced that success is measured by profit and winning at all costs is **the name of the game**. Yes, organisations may pronounce their vision (an illusory dream at times) and their mission (what they wish to achieve so as to realise their mission) but they do so without any attention to values, values being the underlying code of why we do what we do. This is where poetry can come into play, for analysis of a poem, a studied reading of, a moment or two of contemplation can help one **to muse on** and **ponder** some crucial aspects of one topic or another, and it is only by reflection on a matter that any conclusion can be reached, emotive or rational as it might be.

**The future of the world depends more on poets than it does on engineers, says Bill Gates**

Crazy am I or crazy am I not? Before



any judgement is drawn realise that I am in good company for no other than Bill Gates says that the future of the world depends more on poets than it does on engineers. Bill and I are also in good company, for going back in time we can read that it was Plato who said, “The true nature of mankind and human nature (the human condition) is not in the history as told in books but in the vital integrity and insight as provided in the poem”.

So, what is it about poetry which brings me to comment such, any why mention poetry as opposed to other forms of writing? One might be frivolous and say the main advantage is that poetry is short and can be easily digested. Partially true this is, but there are more worthy considerations. An appreciation of poetry involves ‘reading between the lines’ to understand what

the images and references contained **therein** mean in a wider context. This appreciation requires complexity and flexibility of thinking, along with the ability to empathize with and better understand the thoughts and feelings of others.

In all reality, the skills necessary to talk and think about poetry can be of significant benefit to leaders and strategists, to executives who are facing infinite complexity and who are in search of solutions. Most importantly it can impact on a person and help in identifying the values which one would wish to incorporate in one’s own outlook, to both life in general and business in particular.

Now, there are many types of poetry, some too obscure to be a choice for the teaching of poetry in business schools but there are many

which, with a little **astute** selection, would prove perfect for the desired objective. This goal could be declared as the wish to increase and broaden readers’ understanding of poems and how they convey meaning, and also to help readers develop analytical and cognitive skills that will be beneficial in a business context.

## True or not?

When one thinks of poetry one immediately thinks of creativity and ways to communicate a message in a **succinct** form. Does this description remind you of any skills required in the world of business? Understanding the motivation of others, even the value set of others, puts one at an advantage in the world of business. The ability to ‘weigh up’ interlocutors and evaluate and breakdown situations to core essentials is a skill and one needs always to ask as to how skills can be acquired or perfected. True or not?

A closer look at poetry reveals other valuable aspects pertinent to the contention being made in this article. Precise and short verse is considered a plus, imaginative and impactful language an essential, stand out phrases summing up **mood** or intent help the reader a lot, flexibility in style and use of language not a bad thing, ability to immediately capture and sum up a point, a quality. The list could go on but no need to for the point is abundantly made.

And then there is the title, often a driver for the poem itself, or even a definition of a problem or a celebration of a cause. Take for example the titles **‘Maddening light’** or **‘Absent need’** or **‘This is ours’** and one is already half-way to illustrating a topic, outlining a problem, summarising an intent. Combinations and connections one can make can also open new avenues of thinking about poetry and business alike.

**A reading of poetry can help in business where situations need to be analysed, arguments compared or decisions made**

Not to shy away from is the philosophical impact an appreciation of poetry can have on a person’s outlook, almost at times like being on a therapist’s sofa, whereby an understanding of oneself,

one’s value set, one’s dreams and aspirations for the future, one’s resolve to face up to a situation, come shining through. Surely, a reading of poetry can help in business where situations need to be analysed, arguments confronted, decisions made, and at the heart of all these actions is one’s understanding of self.

Yes, it is the understanding of self which is often sadly missing and this may be described as the cardinal sin in business for it is the gap, the **void** in our conscience which often leads us down the wrong road in life. The following lines prove the point.

*I was forever chasing a dime  
Trying to fill those pockets of gold  
Really was working the day and all-night long  
And as you may well imagine was going nowhere fast*

Needless to say, the young man in question as described in the poem lost his true love and lost all he had gained in business dealings too. Reflection, hope, inspiration and even a touch of love are attributes which can come from poetry and help **to mould** a set of values in full consciousness of one’s actions. A fairly bold statement this one, but values do not necessarily fall from the heavens and need to be both acquired and implemented.

**“When power leads man towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations”**

There is no contention in this in this article that all business undergraduates need to begin writing poetry (although what a wonderful force for good in the world that might be) but there is the suggestion that there needs to be a wider and more thought-out basis to business training. Like it or not, many of these graduates will become opinion leaders and decision makers in the world of tomorrow. In their own interests and, without putting too finer a point on it, for the benefit of mankind in general, a verse or two of poetry digested would do no harm at all.

No better way to finish than reproduce the words of John Fitzgerald Kennedy in one of his final public speeches, delivered in Boston in October 1963 and recalling the work of Robert Frost: “When power leads men towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man’s concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses. For art establishes the basic human truth which must serve as the touchstone of our judgement”.

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