ITERATION and EVOLUTION

Activity 6
25 – 80+ minutes
STUDENT/TUTOR NOTES

AIMS. To allow a text to evolve using a technique based on iteration; to explore the editing process.

Group work: Year 12 + ; creative writing groups and MAs. Youngest users **will** need guidance.

TEACHERS/ TUTORS   *PREPARATION for this activity* (to be done by students in a previous lesson, or prior to class):

* Students need to find a short extract of poetry or prose (10 to 30 words, **no more**) and copy it out, legibly, at the **top** of a loose A4 sheet (putting their name on the back). Decide whether they use their *own* writing for this (preferable), or published works. They must bring this sheet to the session [tutors should have some 'spare' extracts to hand, in case].

Note for students: what is 'iteration'? In computing, it's when a set of instructions is applied again and again until you get the required result. In mathematics, it's a way of solving certain kinds of problem by trying a rough answer first, then executing a cycle of operations over and over: each time you do, you input the results from the *previous* computation. Each 'iteration' gets you closer to the exact solution. We're going to use a similar process – on words. But don't worry: no maths needed!

Group Work: STUDENT INSTRUCTIONS

1. Split up into groups of 5 or more. Each group should sit quietly, forming an **unbroken** circle.

2. **Within your circle**, everyone hands their prepared extract [see above*****] to the person on **their left**.

3. Silently, read the extract you've just received. Register its tone, its message. Without writing anything down, without discussion, imagine **two words** you might alter (to improve it, shift the meaning, create a surreal or unexpected feel, etc.). Note: your two changes can involve *adding* or *subtracting* **words**.

4. Working privately, **add** to the sheet your **modified** version of the text, underneath, **legibly**: this should be identical to what you got, **except for your two alterations**. Try not to agonise over your changes – just do (quickly) what feels good. [Note: feel free to *also* alter punctuation or line-breaks, in any way you wish.]

5. **Check!** The sheet you got from your right should now have an extra item on it: namely, *your* modified version of the text, in clear handwriting, just below it. When everyone's ready, hand this to **your left.**

6. **Repeat the procedure** (steps 3 → 5) again and again. Each time you do, you'll get a new text from your right: **always modify the last entry on the sheet.** Ignore the earlier versions: focus on what *you* will do with the bottom-most entry. [Meanwhile, your extract is journeying clockwise round the circle, 'evolving' as it goes.]

Be **brisk**: ideally, do each 'iteration' in a couple of minutes. Do your best to keep up. Avoid backlogs.

After (say) half a dozen iterations (or when your tutor signals): **stop**. **Retrieve your original sheet.**

[**Tutors**: at each iteration, make sure students are modifying the *most recent* version of the text, rewriting it legibly beneath.]

P O E M E V O L V I N G . . .	[PERSON 1 : *Original*]	On lovely spur of cherry – caterpillar tries to hang on sunlit leaf.	**Example** *(using a haiku)*
	[PERSON 2 : Iteration 1]	On spur of cherry – caterpillar tries to hang on sunlight's leaf.	1. 'lovely' cut [← *line-break changed*] 2. 'sunlit' → 'sunlight's'
	[PERSON 3 : Iteration 2]	On spur of cherry : spider tries to hang sunlight's leaf.	[← *colon added*] 1. 'caterpillar' → 'spider' 2. 'on' cut
	[PERSON 4 : Iteration 3]	On burr of cherry : spider tries to catch sunlight's leaf !	1. 'spur' → 'burr' 2. 'hang' → 'catch' [← *exclamation mark added*]
	[PERSON 5: Iteration 4]	On burr of cherry : spider tries to catch – catch sunlight's spark !	1. '– catch' added / 2. 'leaf' → 'spark'

… CHANGES

MADE

Discussion.   In what kinds of ways did your extract evolve? As a group, pool insights. Did anyone *remove* words from your piece to 'tighten things up'? How might iteration be useful in the editing, redrafting or development of your writing? If you didn't use your own work in this exercise, why not redo it using something you've written yourself?

Comments. You'll learn a lot from how others changed your text, but I hope you also felt a real sense of liberation in modifying other people's words (particularly as you were only asked to make *small* changes). It's useful to try to recall that sense of ease when editing your *own* work. Unlike iterations in maths (where you must follow the rules precisely), here you can loosen up the process as your confidence grows. Modify it to suit your own way of editing and redrafting.