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Teaching Poetry in New Formats to Intermediate-Grade Students

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Statement of Purpose

This is not, I hope, just another unit about teaching creative writing. From its inception, I have tried to make this a unit that will serve a purpose: providing the classroom teacher with many specific ideas and resources for teaching poetry to intermediate grade students. This unit deals with the skills needed by the students in order to write poetry, skills needed by the teacher of creative writing and specific examples of poetry in new formats.

Although the unit often suggests activities that might be useful in teaching a particular skill, the teacher can choose those materials and strategies that he or she wants to use, without being locked into prescribed lesson plans. Most of the activities and approaches included in this unit were developed for and used successfully with my own classes. I feel confident, therefore, that many other teachers will find them practical and useful.

Introduction

A major problem facing teachers of creative writing is how to motivate their students to write poetry. Most teachers have heard one or more of their students complain, "I can't write poetry" or "I don't know what to write." Either students have never had a positive experience with poetry and as a result they dislike it or they have never been exposed to poetry in their homes or in school. We, as teachers, can either ignore this area of creative writing or we can try to overcome this negative attitude toward poetry. If we don't teach writing, whether it be poetry, prose, or compositions, who will in our schools? It is our responsibility to offer the students the opportunity to write as much as possible, for it is a lifetime skill essential for them to learn.

I do have my own viewpoints based on my own philosophy of education developed from years of teaching writing to students in grades 5-8. I would like to share these basic observations:

- (1) Students learn more when they are actively involved in a process than when they are sitting passively.
- (2) Learning is enhanced when students are interacting with other persons and that students can learn from one another as well as the teacher.
- (3) Because writing almost always involves self-disclosure, I am convinced it must take place in a climate that is free from threat. If the teacher provides the proper climate and practices writing on a regular basis

throughout the school year, students will write.

(4) Writing of any type is a skill to be practiced and not a given gift. Students must be encouraged to discover and practice writing.

(5) Developing a skill such as writing poetry is generally most successful when the skill is broken down into small steps or subskills and approached sequentially rather than randomly.

Creative expression in poetry is not easy to teach. The teacher feels he/she must be a juggler in order to provide a proper balance between the freedom to play with ideas and express feelings and the discipline of literary demands. In trying to establish this delicate balance, teachers may find a few principles useful.

Principle #1 : Create a motivating atmosphere in the classroom. The physical aspect of the room must be given careful thought. The most effective group and individual work can be accomplished in a room of sufficient size to provide for maximum comfort. Tables and chairs are preferred to conventional desks. Ample lighting is an absolute requirement.

Sample Activities

(1) Have the classroom take on the physical atmosphere of poetry. Poems should be visually available. A wall space could be devoted to poetry. Put up bulletin boards that stimulate children to think about poetry.

(2) Consider a "poetry corner." This space would include books of poems, pictures, sculptures, models, objects, writing paper, pencils, etc.

Principle #2 : Allow students to freely express themselves. In all probability, students have not been encouraged to express their personal ideas and feelings. Teachers may need to place most of the emphasis at the beginning of the year on helping students feel comfortable expressing their genuine feelings. Students need to feel assured that they will not be exposing themselves to ridicule if others learn their inner most thoughts. The student must perceive their classmates as a unified group which will be responsive, respectful and nonjudgmental.

Sample Activities : (for the beginning of the year)

(1) Have students introduce themselves to the group. Periodically test the students to see how well they are remembering names.

(2) Choose a partner and interview that person, trying to learn as many facts about him or her as possible.

(3) Conduct sharing times such as: what was your happiest moment, what qualities appeal to you in a friend, when did you experience fear for the first time, etc. Give students a writing attitude inventory.

(4) Assign students to groups of three. Have them determine two things that all three agree on, disagree on, etc.

(5) Have students self-appraise their writing process:

-What were the last four things you have written?

- How do you feel about writing poetry?
- Do you have any habits which help you get in the mood to write?
- How many hours do you spend writing?
- Do you write in one sitting or do you work on separate sections and at various times?

Principle #3 : Offer models of good poetry as a way to teach the skills and techniques that are the writer's craft. This technique exposes students to a variety of styles, to the use of literary devices and to the approaches a writer can take.

Sample Activities:

(1) Teacher should read famous poems to the class such as:

- "Cat" by Eleanor Farjeon (words that imitate sounds)
- "Buffalo Dusk" by Carl Sandberg (words that imitate sounds)
- "The Duck" by Ogden Nash (emphasis on repetition)
- "The Bat" by Theodore Roethke (descriptive poem)
- "Boy on a Pogo Stick" by James Schevill (descriptive poem)
- "The White Horse" by D.H. Lawrence (poem about scenes)
- "Dust of Snow" by Robert Frost (expresses feelings)
- "To My Brother Miquel" by Cesar Vallejo (expresses love and loss)

(2) Encourage students to read poetry aloud to themselves and to each other.

(3) Use choral reading of poetry in your classroom. It's a technique which adds to children's enjoyment of poetry by directly involving them.

Skills Needed by Students

Teachers may find Donald M. Murray's book, *A Writer Teaches Writing* useful. As its title indicates, this book is meant to provide a sensible approach on how to teach writing. Murray outlines ideas necessary for teaching writing by observing the skills of professional writers.

I. *Discovering a Subject* —What motivates us to write must come from our own experiences. Students have a wealth of resources that they can tap for their writing. Each student has opinions, insights, and experiences about which to write. They must be taught to be open and susceptible to the world around them. Many students are not in the habit of attending to the world around them. They don't see and hear and feel as keenly as the good writer must. Their powers of observation must be developed, so that they are sensitive to the world through which they move each day. Only then can they develop skills for communicating their experiences to others.

Sample Activities:

(a) Have students describe the school in terms of the smells (or the sounds, sights, feelings, and tastes) they notice during a walk down the hall.

-Assign students to observe various rooms of the school such as the cafeteria, library, shop, home economics, gym, main office, etc. Have students record their experiences in terms of their senses and then share their results with the class.

(b) Take students on a field trip. Then have them record their sensory impressions. Expose students to various ways of recording such as: diaries, journals, news reports, commentaries, etc.

(c) Have students discover the role of sound and noise.

-Have all the students close their eyes and listen silently for one minute; then list on the board all the sounds they heard.

-Ask students whether morning sounds differ from evening sounds. If so, what are they?

-Suggest students listen to various people's voices. Do they sound alike or different? Have them listen to family, friends, strangers, and describe their voices.

(d) Bring to the class pieces of apple, orange, or onion. Have students eat one and describe the experience.

(e) Have students look out a window and describe what they see, including colors, sizes, shapes, textures, lights, etc.

(f) Have students take their senses through a tour of the four seasons. Does winter feel different from summer? Does autumn smell different from spring? What tastes go with which season?

II. *Sensing an Audience* —Writing that is not read is like the tree that falls in the forest with no one to hear it; one wonders whether it creates any sound at all. A writing assignment that is undertaken for only the teacher to read is not likely to motivate a student. Such writing is merely an exercise. It is imperative that the teacher supply students with more of an audience than just the teacher; it may be simply another student in the class or the class as a whole, or it could be the entire school or even the community. We all need the reinforcement

that comes when others read and respond to our work. A student must discover his/her audience before he/she begins to write so as to speak in terms the reader will understand.

Sample Activities:

(a) Allow each student to choose a partner in the classroom to read his or her writing and respond to them and *not* to mark errors. The purpose of this activity is to allow students to receive feedback from their peers and to encourage rapport among class members.

-Questions that students might ask each other:

1. "What did you like best about my paper?"
2. "Which details struck you as most interesting?"
3. "Was there any point that you did not really understand?"
4. "Was there any place where I should have added more details to my description?"
5. "Was there any place where I seemed to wander from my topic?"
6. "Was there any place in which my examples, reasons, or explanations needed developing?"
7. "Was there any place in my paper that was hard to follow?"

(b) Ask students to choose a partner to correspond to on a regular basis. Do not assign or suggest content. Letter writing is the most practical way to give students an audience.

(c) Have a class compile the writings that they liked best and reproduce an anthology of the classwork to be distributed to other classes in the school.

(d) Help students become involved in writing for the school newspaper or newsletter.

III. *Searching for Specifics* —A student must collect data, examples, reasons, facts, etc., in order to really comprehend the topic. Where does a writer find specifics? He can use recorded sources (books, articles, letters, diaries, tape-recordings, movies) or live sources including himself, his family, relatives, neighbors, classmates, etc. Students must learn to provide specific details that give the reader a clear image. They must learn how to select those details which fit their topic and omit those which don't. They must be able to use words to create a mood or an image which will evoke feelings in the reader. Students must learn not only to sharpen their senses and their imagination but also their vocabularies.

Sample Activities:

(a) Pass out to students lists of details. Ask students to summarize each group of details in one sentence.

- *Example* : golden-brown turkey, hot apple pie, juicy cranberry sauce, steaming sweet potatoes. (Foods found on a table on Thanksgiving Day.)

- *Example* : the slap-stick comedy of the Three Stooges, an early I Love Lucy episode, re-runs of the Flintstones, a commercial for Sugar Frosted Flakes.

(What can be seen on television on Saturday morning.)

(b) Pass out a random list of vocabulary words. Have students identify the words as subjective (words which reflect the writer rather than the image; words which label) or descriptive (words which refer to the actual observable characteristics).

- *Examples* : green (D) exciting (S)

fantastic (S) bumpy (D)

sturdy (D) bald (D)

wonderful (S) straight (D)

(c) Read students several statements in which the connotation of the word is positive, slightly negative, and very negative.

- *Examples* : I am *pleasantly plump* ; you're *putting* on weight; he's *obese* .

I *get around* ; you're *into everything* ; she's a *busybody* .

-Have students create their own.

(d) Have students describe the classroom as it might be seen by: a teacher, a student, or a parent.

(e) Practice sentence deletion exercises and word deletion exercises.

(f) Do "Expanding with Parallel Construction" Exercises.

- *Example* : practice the use of adverbs

stop and listen

stopped and listened

stopped quickly and listened carefully

The bank robber *stopped quickly* and *listened carefully* to the sirens in the distance.

(g) Word Choice—give a sentence which is uninteresting and lacks force. Replace the underlined word with a more meaningful one.

- *Example* : The coach was in a *bad* mood. (nasty, sour, sullen, huffy)

(h) Practice writing to be *heard* not to be *read* .

IV. Creating a Design—A student must learn to plan and chart out what he/she has to write. A professional writer does not write until he/she has an idea of what he/ she has to say and how he/she can say it. Students must learn not to rush and just put anything down on paper. The following are ways to encourage planning and to redirect the impulse of just filling up a piece of paper.

Sample Activities:

(a) Encourage outlining one's thoughts.

(b) Have scrap paper available so students feel they can cross out or put arrows, etc. Students should not feel afraid or unwilling to change their writing.

-Encourage students in either oral or written exercises that there is more than one way to say something.

-Have a section in your room where graffiti is permitted. Allow students to freely express themselves.

-Have support groups of 4-5 students. Have them exchange their writings and try to rewrite each other's work. Observations such as: "You said it better than I" or "I never thought to say it that way" or "I like the word you chose."

(c) Do not put a time limit on a writing assignment. Give a due date which enables the student to have the freedom to complete the assignment in school or at home. Have students hand-in their work in stages: outlines, first drafts, second drafts, and the final drafts.

(d) Have students learn how to proofread their *own* writing. Students should read their writing with an objective eye to see if it really speaks to the audience and purpose they have in mind.

-Mutually design a checklist with your class. Agree upon 10 objectives which should be present in their writings. Give a copy of this checklist to each student so they may self-correct their own final draft before handing it in to the teacher.

- *Possible objectives* :

1. Topic speaks to the audience
2. Spelling
3. Subject-verb agreement
4. Punctuation/Capitalization
5. Clear development
6. Good organization, including a clear beginning, middle, and end
7. Sufficient details, facts, or information to maintain reader interest.
8. Interesting word choice
9. Correct sentence structure
10. Sticking to the topic

V. Writing and Rewriting —Writing is a commitment. A first draft does not mean completion; it is just the first step of a long, tedious process. Writing is no less complex a skill than playing the piano or tennis; without regular practice there can be no hope of achieving mastery.

Sample Activities:

(a) Have students assume the role of editor. Have them exchange papers to look for flaws in spelling, sentence structure, verb agreement, etc.

(b) Teacher should ask for first and second drafts. Never accept a piece of writing unless it's gone through the process of rewriting.

The Writing Teacher

Teachers of writing must also possess certain skills in order to motivate students. A teacher of writing must listen, coach, read, and diagnose. Writing teachers must be aware of the students' needs and not just their own. We, as writing teachers, should ask questions not of ourselves, but of our students such as: "What are they curious about?" "What issues concern them?" Students' writing is personal, the more it means to them the more valuable it is. Writing topics should emerge naturally from other classroom activities—discussions, literature, role playing, debates, interviews, etc. We must convey an attitude of respect and caring for all our students and insist that class members also display these qualities toward one another. Therefore, at the very beginning of the year, the teacher is advised to help students get acquainted with one another through structured activities for name learning and trust building. Until the level of trust is present, students will be guarded about participating in discussions and sharing their writing with the class.

Ideally the writing teacher should function as a facilitator of learning. The attitude of the facilitator has to do with atmosphere. How can the teacher create a psychological climate in which the student will feel free to make mistakes, will feel free to learn from the world, from fellow students, from the teacher, from experience? How can teachers help students recapture the excitement of learning which they all experienced as infants? There are three basic attitudes essential to be a facilitator of learning: genuineness in teacher's relationship with students, acceptance of the other as a person of worth, and the ability to understand how the student feels. Writing teachers should forget to be teachers and in setting their students free to learn, writing will come naturally.

It is also believed that teachers should read and discuss students' work letting language study grow naturally out of their work. Encourage and praise and remember that what's important is the quality of writing not the quantity of errors. Above all, writing teachers must be active participants and write with their class to convince students that you believe in what you are teaching; it validates the assignments. Secondly, it shows students that teachers have the same difficulties writing. Finally, it interests students to discover that teachers are also individuals with personal feelings and opinions.

Poetry in New Formats

Having established how to motivate students to write and what skills the student and teacher should possess, I will concentrate the rest of my unit on different types of poetry (poetry in new formats) that could be used throughout the school year. Before I share my students' poems with the reader, I would like to share some basic observations:

- (1) A poet uses words to reveal what he/she sees. The poet creates by using words to make the reader feel the same emotions, hear the same sounds, etc.
- (2) Talk about poetry in a simple way—remove barriers such as rhyme, meter, punctuation, etc. These obstacles only reinforce students' fear that poetry is difficult.
- (3) It is not necessary to make students memorize terms as: alliteration, simile, assonance, metaphor, personification, etc. Use your imagination; there are simpler ways to explain these terms.

- *For Example* : simile (comparing using like or as) personification (giving objects human qualities)

- (4) A teacher shouldn't correct or grade a child's poem. It will inhibit a child's writing.
- (5) Don't teach poetry in isolation—relate it to whatever content area subjects you are teaching at that time.

I would like to elaborate on that final point. The poems I have chosen all practice a particular concept which any grammar or reading book covers in grades 5-8. Instead of always having students complete dittos or workbook pages by filling in the blanks, have them practice the concept by writing poems.

- *For Example*:
Body Talk Poetry—practices verbs ending in -ing, requires no punctuation or rhyme

Couplet—stresses rhyming and expressing a complete thought

Cinquain—a five-lined poem which contains adjectives, verbs ending in -ing and knowledge of nouns which are synonyms

People Poetry—reviews adjectives, verbs, adverbs, and phrases that begin with if only I . . . and as . . . as

Haiku—requires students to know how to count syllables

I Used To Be . . . Poems—review I used to be . . . but now I am . . . some rhyming is required

Wishing Poems—practices the phrase I wish I were . . .

Limerick—a five-lined poem, lines 1,2, and 5 must rhyme and lines 3 and 4 must rhyme

Diamante—is an Old English word which means “diamond-shaped”, practices the use of adjectives, verbs ending in -ing, nouns, and the concept of nouns which are antonyms

Personification—requires students to use their imagination and bring inanimate objects to life

Triangular Triplets—last word of each phrase or sentence must rhyme, if done correctly the reader should be able to start the poem from any one of the three sides and still have it make sense

Concrete Poetry—a visual portrayal of the students ideas

BODY TALK POEMS

Hands I got a . . .

Touching Stamp-sticker

Closing medicine-taker

Clapping food-taker

Grasping whistle-blower

Washing funny-face-maker

Praying cake-eater

Covering noise-maker

Holding

Scratching I got a tongue!

COUPLET

As I was walking down the street,
I heard a bird say—tweet, tweet.

PEOPLE POETRY

John Travolta

Dreamy-eyed and gorgeous
Disco dances fantastically
As smooth as a silver satin shirt
If only I could get a date with him.

CINQUAIN

Winter weather
Wet, cold
Snowing, raining, hailing
Always changing in Connecticut
Temperature.

I USED TO BE. . .

I used to be a piece of paper,
getting ripped and thrown away.
But now I'm a newly formed star,
Always showing people the way.

HAIKU

Winter so pretty
The snowflakes so soft and cold
A wonderful sight.

WISHING POEMS

I wish I were a car,
Driving down the street.
I'd pick up all my friends,
And take them for a treat.

DIAMANTE

Moon
Distant, large
Moving, shining, changing
Rockets, men, water, mountains
Revolving, spinning, expanding
Beautiful, planet
Earth.

LIMERICK

There once was an army battle,
With shells making a loud rattle.
Even though the soldiers were tiring,
The guns were still firing.
It sounded like a herd of stamping cattle.

PERSONIFICATION—Being a Football

I am a professional league football. I like being a football because I am the most important object in the game. I also like being so close to famous players and the cheerleaders!
I dislike being kicked so much. It is also a rough life when you have five or six two hundred pound

guys on top of you.
TRIANGULAR TRIPLETS

(figure available in print form)

CONCRETE POETRY—My Euglena

(figure available in print form)

Conclusion

Once students gain the confidence in writing their own poetry, the teacher can introduce adult poems into the classroom. The teacher can make this transition knowing that students already know what it's like to write poetry. Students will have enough experience to make them feel like poets and feel close to poetry; this should help them in reading and understanding what other poets have written.

The purpose of teaching poetry to students is to experience what so many other people have found in poetry, not just so you will know more, or understand more, but so you will enjoy more. Surely one of the major purposes of education is to increase people's capacity to enjoy life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Evertts, Eldonna L. *Explorations in Children's Writing*. Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1970. (Available at S.H.U.)

This text contains the opinions and ideas of four educators: Eldonna Evertts, James Britton, Alvina Burrows, and Richard Lewis. All four contributors are innovators of new approaches for teaching writing. The recurring theme is that teachers of writing should break out of the habit of looking at children's writing in terms of adult priorities and models. Rather, children's writing should stand by itself as a representation of their own experiences and ideas.

Koch, Carl and James M. Brazil. *Strategies for Teaching the Composition Process*. Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978. (Available at S.H.U.)

Teachers will find this book practical, involving, student-centered, and easily implemented in the classroom. It is *not* a textbook, but a book of useable exercises for teaching writing. The strategies found in this book help students learn the compositional process.

Koch, Kenneth. *Rose , Where Did You Get That Red?* New York: Random House Publishers, 1973. (Available at S.H.U.)

The author shows by having students read and write poetry as a part of classroom lessons, students are able to enjoy and learn from such poets as: Shakespeare, Donne, Blake, etc. There is an anthology of about 50 or more poems to teach children with suggestions on how to teach each one.

Koch, Kenneth. *Wishes , Lies and Dreams*. New York: Random House Publishers, 1970. (Available at S.H.U.)

This is a collection of poems by elementary school students at P.S. 61 in Manhattan. It is perhaps the best book to read for it portrays the joy young people experience when writing in a happy environment where people care about their work.

Murray, Donald M. *A Writer Teaches Writing : A Practical Method of Teaching Composition* . New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968. Available at S.H.U.)

This book gives teachers an effective method of teaching writing based on the experiences of professional writers. It shows how the skills of a publishing writer can be learned by the student. I highly recommend it.

Petitt, Dorothy. *Poems To Enjoy* . New York: The Macmillan Co., 1970. (Available at S.H.U.)

A collection of new and old poems easily understood and interpreted by children of all ages.

Sherwood, Phyllis A. *A Laboratory Approach To Writing* . Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977. (Available at S.H.U.)

The theme of this book is to offer teachers methods and a theoretical base for experimenting with the teaching of writing in a laboratory classroom situation. The author offers strategies, models, and exercises for teachers and students that are a means of discovering by doing.

Wiener, Harvey S. *Any Child Can Write* . New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1978. (Available at S.H.U.)

The author explains how to improve your child's writing skills from preschool through high school. Drawing on his experiences as both parent and teacher, Wiener presents a sequence of specific writing experience activities and games ranging from pre-school to secondary level. Excellent manual for parents who wish to complement/ supplement their children's writing instruction.

Key : (S.H.U. stands for Sacred Heart University)

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