



Putting Poetry on it's Feet

Curriculum Unit 89.02.06
by Maggie Roberts

I have had the good fortune to have spent the last three years teaching theater to middle school children. The Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School was designed to use the arts; music, dance, visual arts, and theater to introduce students to alternative experiences for learning. Writing this paper has helped me to develop a unit using poetry with sixth, seventh and eighth graders to strengthen language skills and to activate their imaginations.

In order to gain focus, I have directed my ideas to a particular class of eighth graders whom I have worked with for 3 years already. This is advantageous for me: I know these students well and can tailor this unit to their strengths and limitations. I will be most confident experimenting on them.

As I began thinking about poetry I was reminded of times in my own life when poetry was exciting to me. There were many instances when a poem felt important for one reason or another. Using my own various memories made it difficult for me to focus my unit yet I knew that remembering how it felt to be transported by a poem was key to my understanding how to get poetry to my students. The thread I found to hang onto was the feeling that the speaker was talking just to me. I remember a poem by Emily Dickinson:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—Too?
Then there's a pair of us?
Don't tell! they'll banish us—you know!

Even today when I read those lines I feel the kinship offered by the poet. All the feelings of isolation and invisibility I felt as an adolescent come rushing back.

In the theater we try to establish another world. This is what I believe people come for when they buy tickets to a play. We all need escape from the anxiety of daily existence. It is the sense of being someplace else that I want to try to create in my classroom.

During my adolescence I became excited about the performing arts. It was easy for me to personalize a song or a poem. Comprehension was not an issue for me; I had a natural confidence that I understood the intention of the writer. I sensed I had a special friend. The intimacy I felt was one I longed for and responded to. I felt trust at a time when trusting my peers was confusing and threatening to me.

Poetry has been a part of my life as far back as I can remember: my mother and her sisters would write poems and alternate lyrics to songs for family occasions, the camp I went to for five summers encouraged us to submit poems for our “end of the summer” magazine. But it was the creative dance class I took Saturday afternoons where I really freed myself with the help of poetry, and it is this experience that I have found the most to draw on for strategies in this unit.

Truda Kaschmann’s dance class met for an hour and a half, she devoted the last 20 minutes to different kinds of improvisation. One form of improvisation was dancing to poetry. Mrs. Kaschmann would recite a poem to us, allowing time between lines for us to move about. Each interpretation was correct in her eyes, and so we valued our own interpretations and our self-confidence and creativity grew.

During high school I wrote poetry and I created a performance piece using the poetry of Emily Dickinson, E.E. Cummings, and others as an audition for Dance college. I recorded myself reciting the choreographed movement to the words. I would like my poetry unit to culminate in a similar kind of performance piece.

I read from a lot of anthologies as preparation for writing this unit. By using collections I was able to look for poets I’d heard of, and to respond to titles that interested me. I also found the poems that we each brought in to share in our weekly seminar meetings extremely helpful because we examined many of them together. Books that gave writing exercises and those written by theater artists and educators who used poetry for performance pieces and for classroom activities were good sources for specific strategies. I found many poems that moved me, but I tried to limit my choices for this unit to poems which described experiences my students may have already had in their own lives.

I had another reason for wanting to develop a unit using poetry. I see 12 to 23 students for one hour each week. If they have chosen to take theater as their “choice” class I work with them two more separate hours a week. Poetry has many characteristics which make it ideal for this one hour format. The game of discovering the rhyme, meter and form of a poem, creates a sense of adventure. By choosing poems no longer than one page in length I hope to create class hours in which a student can experience a sense of success.

Metaphor and character engages one’s imagination immediately. As students read a poem, they create pictures in their minds without even being aware that they are “working” on the poem. It is the role of the teacher to discuss and hear the many reactions students have to a poem so that the students develop an awareness of the many “right ways” to read it.

OBJECTIVES

1. Reading poetry aloud develops communication skills, like enunciation, intonation, and listening. Students will feel themselves speaking and will find out quickly whether others have understood

them.

2. Poetry is also a form of storytelling. Through discussion and improvisation, students will explore the content of the poem: time and place, the characters presented or implied by the poet, exposition, conflict and resolution, theme.

3. Writing and revising poetry will enable theater students to gain confidence in their abilities to express themselves to others. Students will also gain a sense that their own experiences are important and valid for use in creative writing.

4. Improvisation develops students' ability to work with others. By working with a partner or in small groups students will develop flexibility, cooperation, and associative thinking.

I will use three poems as example lesson plans in this unit. The lesson plans can be use sequentially and may be useful to introduce a play or novel with a similar theme. I address that at the end of the lesson plans. I have amended the Lesson Plan for "Mother to Son" to include a lesson plan for working with adults in a 20 minute time frame. We used this in our seminar to explore teaching strategies. You might find it useful for an in-service workshop.

LESSON PLAN #1

"Mother to Son"

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor.
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turni' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you find it kinder hard.
Don't you fall now.
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin'

And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

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This poem was brought to our writing seminar by another of the fellows. Nicole Pearson, a seventh grader at BRAMS performed it beautifully for our "Theater Night" this past June. It's by Langston Hughes, a very important black poet who lived from 1906 to 1967. The relationship of mother to child is one I feel my students can identify with easily. The poem touches on parenting, separation, and goals for life. All of these are issues I like to discuss with my students. Even though the speaker is the mother you can get a strong sense of her son by the way she expresses herself to him.

In our first hour with this poem I'll begin by having the students read the poem to themselves and then asking for a volunteer to read it aloud to the group. We will discuss what the poem is about. I will ask the students to think about what the poet has told us about the mother. What does she want? In acting terms we speak of the character's "main objective". Our first activity will explore working with objectives and the "who": who they are.

The students work in pairs. As each pair volunteers to take a turn performing for the group I will tell each student, by whispering in their ear, how they are related (brothers) and what they want from their scene partner (to borrow \$5, to get a ride downtown). They will improvise a scene in which they each go after their objectives. The students watching will try to figure out what the relationship is and what the objectives were.

The next time we meet we will reread the poem. This time the focus of the hour is exploring "how" a character

goes after their objective. How does this mother make a case for what she wants from her child?

A game I like to use involves working with descriptive words written on small pieces of paper and stuffed into a paper bag. Students sit in a circle. A student pulls out a piece of paper and reads the word to the group. The word might be angry, happy, sassy etc. Starting with one word from the poem, each student would take a turn saying the word in the manner described by the piece of paper. Next, students use a whole line from the poem following the same procedure described above. In the third step, each student reaches into the bag, reads the descriptive word silently, and then uses it to say a line of the poem. The other students guess what the student's "secret" word was.

Another class hour would explore the "where": where does the scene in this poem take place? What time of day might it be? None of the answers to these questions are explicit in the poem; the students' responses will be varied because they will emerge from their imaginations. Here is an opportunity to show that there are no "right" answers to creative questions.

An exercise that explores this experience of the "where" through the senses is one in which students begin moving around the room. I call out, "it's snowing and the snow is slippery, ... now we are in the desert and it's very hot." Encourage your students to make their movement reflect each new piece of information. "Now we are on our own street walking to the store, it's August and it's a white sky day. . . .we are in the hallway of a tenement and it doesn't smell good, people are yelling at each other behind the closed door of an apartment". At this point students may come up with their own suggestions for this activity.

A fourth class hour focuses on physical action. Examining the poem again we will look for answers to "what" the characters might be doing during this scene. Again the answers are not explicit and the students need to use their imaginations to respond to this question. People are always up to something, they are rarely sitting still.

We can use a transformation game. Students are seated in a circle. A plastic bag is passed from one student to the next. Each student uses the bag differently than anyone who has taken a turn before. The others try to interpret what the student with the bag has in mind.

You can reuse the bag of descriptive words with this game so that the "how" is combined with the "what". Physical action in drama helps illuminate the motivation and emotional state of the character. If the character is upset it will be apparent in the way in which they handle any object.

After exploring these elements of drama individually we are ready to make the activity more complex and to use this poem as a beginning point for improvisation. What has happened just before this scene, last week, last year? I don't think that the child in the poem has to be male; urge girls to identify with the child/mother relationship in this poem.

Another improvisation might involve other members of this family. This mother and child have a special relationship, is this child the oldest? What is unique about being the oldest in a family?

Improvise another conversation between these two people, one that might take place tomorrow or next year.

As a writing exercise we might decide that the child in the poem is ten. Have students write a poem as if it's four years later. As writers, the children talk about their relationship with their mothers now, remembering this conversation. What do parents want for their children? What do children want to achieve for their parents?

What do they want to achieve for themselves?

This poem would be an appropriate one to kick off a unit on the play *Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry or *The Oxcart* by the Puerto Rican playwright, René Marques. A major theme in both of these plays is Mother/Son relationships. The exploration of this poem can introduce students to the major theme found in the plays; the quest for happiness and security. The reading of the play will be enriched because the students have already personalized the theme.

You can use this poem to explore other cultures. Both plays take place at a previous time and in a different setting than the city of New Haven yet the circumstances of the poem could be interpreted as present day New Haven, and the son could be the age of our students. After working to understand the poem it will be easier for the students to transfer their identification with “the son” in the poem to “the sons” in these two plays even though the ages and nationalities are different than their own.

YALE-NEW HAVEN TEACHERS INSTITUTE

FINAL SEMINAR SESSION

LESSON PLAN—WORKING WITH POETRY THROUGH DRAMA (10 ADULTS)

MATERIALS: copies of the poem, *Mother to Son* by Langston Hughes

TIME: 20 minutes.

PLACE: Classroom, Yale’s Graduate Center.

OBJECTIVE: To express and present the themes found in the poem NON-VERBALLY.

STRATEGIES: Choosing a poem that this group had already discussed.

DIRECTIONS FOR THE ACTIVITY

1. Divide into two groups.
2. Each group has the same objective.
3. Each member must be an active participant.
4. Options for non-verbal expression:
 - a. movement; pantomime or abstract movement.
 - b. visual; human tableau, visual aids, or silent movie.
 - c. sound; singing or sound effects.

Each group worked with some input from me for 10 minutes. When the groups presented their work, each one used the one male in the group as “the boy”. Each group used the other members to portray what the mother wanted, thus discovering a key element of drama, THE CHARACTER’S MAIN OBJECTIVE.

Group 2 used pantomime and movement. Each of the three women portrayed a different “how” of the mother. Group 1 created a still tableau, the son was defined representationally and the other three women chose abstract images. Discussion followed each presentation. Group 2 felt the still tableau had a more powerful effect. They took a second turn and distilled their original idea into a tableau.

LESSON PLAN #2

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—Too?
Then there’s a pair of us?
Don’t tell! they’d advertise—you know!
How dreary—to be—Somebody!
How public—like a Frog—
To tell one’s name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog!

This is the poem I remembered from my own adolescence and one which I think will be excellent as an example of self-expression and for the study of rhyme.

We will begin by reading the poem silently and then having a volunteer read it aloud to the group. We will discuss the content of the poem; who is talking, what kind of person is the speaker, do you know anyone like this person? Next we will look for the main objective of the speaker: what does this person want?

At this point I will pass out some poems from a show called “The Me Nobody Knows”. This was a musical made up of poetry by young people. Each student will have their own poem to read silently and then read to the group.

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Next I will ask students to find somewhere comfortable to sit and write a short poem (seven lines) telling a secret. It can be a real secret or one that the student makes up. Students need to be encouraged to write very neatly so that others can read it.

When they have finished I will collect the poems and pass them back out so that each one has someone else's poem to read aloud to the group.

Next I will ask students to take their poems back and choose one idea presented in their poem and write two lines that rhyme. The poem by Emily Dickinson can be used to show examples of rhymes.

After students have completed this exercise we will come back into the circle and this time each student will read his or her own writing.

I will collect the two writing exercises and keep them for next week's work. Some students will not have completed one of the exercises. They can do that when the class meets again. Those who have will go on to write an "abate" rhyme using their original poem for content.

LESSON PLAN #3

"The Streetcleaner's Lament"

dirt and
clean them clean them clean them
dirt and
leave them let them rot
dirt and stench and
clean them clean them
bending at the waist and stabbing—
papers papers blowing sticking
never leave them
clean them clean them
people put them
now remove them
clean streets sidewalks
quick
remove them
dirt and dirt and dirt forever.

"The Streetcleaner's Lament" from *8 A.M. Shadows* by Patricia Hubbell. Copyright © 1965 by Patricia Hubbell. Used by permission of Atheneum Publishers, an imprint of Macmillan Publishing Company.

The two objectives I hope to address with this poem are incorporating movement into the presentation of a poem, and developing students' awareness of BRAMS' theme for the year, THE LIVING EARTH, environment and ecology.

This time we will begin with an activity called "Sound and Movement". This game is played standing in a circle. The teacher establishes a beat using a tambourine or by clapping her hands. The group picks up the beat clapping along. The teacher passes the tambourine to a student then moves into the center of the circle with a simple, repetitive movement. After a few seconds the first person (the teacher) moves towards someone in the circle to "give" the movement to. That student copies the movement. When they've gotten the movement the first person takes the place of the second who moves to the center of the circle and evolves the movement into a new one. After that movement has been established and solidifies into something simple and easy to repeat the same procedure follows with the student moving to a new person to give the movement to. This pattern should be repeated until everyone has had a turn. The group keeps the beat going constantly. Sometimes students need to be cautioned not to speed up the beat.

Next copies of the poem are passed around while students are still standing in a circle. Each student reads two lines aloud, this may result in the poem being read twice. I have divided the poem into 9 parts. I then instruct the students to read the poem aloud in pairs trying to make their two voices sound like one. A beat is established again and the students repeat their lines in pairs to the beat.

We are ready to find movements to go with the lines. At this point I will talk with the class about litter; what kinds of trash you find in a park? Have they ever seen someone cleaning up the New Haven Green after a big concert? I will ask for volunteers to show us the different ways trash can be collected. I encourage them to simplify the movement so that it can go with a beat.

Now students are ready to choose their own movements to go with their lines from the poem. They are encouraged to use the whole classroom to move about. I remind them to choose a simple movement so that they can repeat it many times. I keep the beat going or have one student serve this function so that I can circulate and help those students having difficulty. It may take students a few minutes to agree on a movement for the lines they share. We come together again and the pairs of students show the group their lines and movements.

There are two different activities that would be fun to use with the poem. One is a variation on a game called "Orchestra" found in "Bananas". The teacher as "conductor" can point to pairs activating them to do their line and movement or "part". You can have them continue quietly as you add in other parts. You can vary the dynamics by having the students come in loudly or softly, or change the speed with which they say the words and move. After establishing the game, choose a student to be the conductor.

If the activity above sounds too difficult you might try making the poem into a round. Go through it once line by line then begin the poem again layering the parts in. To give focus to the new lines students move down stage center, moving upstage as they repeat it. You may wish to create a sense that they are cleaning the space as they move about repeating their lines and movements.

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ADDITIONAL READING SUGGESTIONS

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