

MINING FOR GOLD: POETRY WRITING IN THE SECONDARY ESL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the many benefits of using poetry writing in the teaching of English, along with suggestions for implementing it. It is argued that poetry can be effective in promoting motivation, personal growth, conceptual development, fluency, creativity and imagination, use of concrete language, appreciation for the nuances of word meaning, and sensitivity to word usage. The author describes a series of activities, suitable for students who typically have written little or no poetry previously, and often have misconceptions about it. The paper concludes with an overview of how poetry writing can develop conceptual and other skills needed for successfully coping with the increasing complexities of the modern world.

Introduction

In my many years of teaching, nothing has ever come close to the joy I've experienced when a student first realizes that she knows English well enough to create a poem. By this I mean not just something that looks like a poem on the page, but carefully crafted lines which, when spoken, convey something to listening classmates which she never could have told them any other way.

For the past twelve years I have taught poetry writing to intermediate and advanced ESL students at two Philadelphia inner-city high schools. Virtually none of them had written much poetry in English, though a handful had done so in their native language. Most of them were afraid of poetry, and had the usual range of misconceptions – that poems were written in old-fashioned language unconnected to anything they knew; that poems contained fancy, difficult words; that poems usually rhymed; and that writing them was something advanced speakers did — certainly not learners still struggling with the basic rudiments of the language. Another assumption by some — at least initially — was that when we were writing poems, we were wasting valuable time that should have been used for the really important things.

Unfortunately, many of these attitudes also appear to be common among second language educators. Apart from misconceptions about what poems are and how to write them, there is a widespread assumption that poetry is a “frill”, to be assigned

much lower priority than the “basics” of reading, grammar, and vocabulary. The following section will discuss why poetry is in fact every bit as valuable as any of these, and deserves more attention in a balanced curriculum aimed at optimal linguistic, cognitive, and personal development.

After touching on the matter of teaching resources, the remainder of the chapter will describe some of the key strategies I have found effective over the years in enabling the students to produce poems of surprisingly high quality. My main resource has always been the students themselves, who invariably had a great deal to say, and were only too ready to say it once they had been given a few simple tools. The strategies I developed were mostly tools of this kind, intended to open the wellsprings of expression and provide channels for their extraordinary energy and need to tell their stories. They were mostly intuitive responses to whatever I perceived to be needed for this unfolding at various stages of the process.

There are many simple forms that were developed for children but are suitable for all beginning poetry writers, especially those with limited English. A classic guide is Kenneth Koch's *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* (1970) which allows the novice to get a feel for writing poetry by completing such lines as “I used to be____, but now I'm_____.” Nevertheless, I find that my own preference is to start off with a minimum of structure — instead using methods that will enable them to directly express what is closest to them and what they most want to say, in their own natural style and rhythm.

The progression of activities described here is just one way of getting the process of poetry writing underway, one which I have found useful in helping students find their voice and refine their powers of expression. While it suits my own style and predilections and has led to results, which are often startlingly precocious, it is by no means the only effective way of producing good poetry. Anything that engages students' curiosity and builds their confidence will work since there is so much they are already waiting to say. The main thing is to share our enthusiasm for the wonders of poetry, read lots of it aloud, and above all, find time for it in a crowded curriculum. In the section below, I present some of the reasons why it is important and infinitely rewarding to do so.

Benefits of Poetry Writing in L1 And L2

There are many reasons why poetry writing is basic to any good language programme, including second language education. Here is an outline of some of the factors I consider most important:

Poetry Can Motivate

Poetry can give voice to a student's deepest feelings and concerns, many of which are "off limits" in other types of writing. Students at all levels can get a feeling of accomplishment from creating a piece of writing which has beauty and expressiveness, even if they lack sophisticated technical knowledge of the language and have difficulty with longer pieces. Such success often dramatically affects the images they have of themselves as learners. Reading poetry aloud helps students appreciate the beauty and expressive possibilities of the language they are learning. Creating something beautiful from the student's cultural heritage or personal experience validates both the student and the culture. It can be very gratifying to watch students gather around a bulletin board containing work from a variety of cultures, as they enjoy both the richness of their collective experience and their own pride in having contributed to it.

Poetry Promotes Personal Growth and Interpersonal Understanding

Poetry allows students to communicate with each other through voicing their deepest feelings and most meaningful personal experiences. It promotes their understanding of other cultures on an emotional and experiential level. It helps make them keen, active observers of both their inner and outer worlds. Like all artistic expression, it enables them to "let off steam" in a creative, positive way. It often happens that adolescents with the worst behavior problems become the most articulate and energetic poets. For those who are trying to work things out, be heard, and be appreciated, it is both a useful tool and a supportive companion.

Poetry has Overall Educational Benefit

Poetry promotes authentic and concise writing vs. empty and over-used abstractions. Both reading and writing poetry introduce the student to a wide variety of genres, literary devices, voices, and styles. Poetry also encourages metaphorical thinking, which aids all aspects of learning. According to Williams (1983), metaphors "organize and connect information," and involve "recognizing and understanding patterns and general principles which give meaning to specific facts" (p 59). In the process of "making the strange familiar," we "break preconceived connections and generate new and unusual ones" (p. 72).

Poetry develops creativity and imagination in general. The great Russian psychologist and thinker Lev Vygotsky — a connoisseur of poetry who took time to read it to his children despite the pressures of time and failing health — was passionate about the value of extending the boundaries of the mind through imagination. He wrote (emphasis mine):

Each step in the child's achievement of a more profound penetration of reality is linked with his continued liberation from earlier, more primitive forms of cognition. *A more profound penetration of reality demands that consciousness attain a freer relationship to the elements of that reality*, that consciousness depart from the external and apparent aspect of reality that is given directly in perception. The result is that *the processes through which the cognition of reality is achieved become more complex and richer*.

(Vygotsky, 1987, p. 349)

Poetry Encourages Visual Thinking

A key factor in effective reading is visual thinking, something often underdeveloped in children who turn on the television more often than they open a book. It has been found that learners who are trained to generate mental images as they read can substantially improve reading comprehension (Williams, 1983). Vygotsky (1994) believed that extended visual thinking in childhood is crucial for the development of intellect.

Poetry Promotes Thinking in Terms of Networks and Patterns

Vygotsky claims that in the development of thinking, "one must turn from a study of concepts as isolated entities to a study of the 'fabric' made of concepts." (1986, p. 204). Poems are uniquely suited to this type of thought process since, as Roger notes, "the precise contextual value of every word, phrase, clause and sentence of a poem can be inferred only from its interaction with all the others in the text" (Rodger, 1983, p. 41).

Poetry has Specific Benefits for Second-language Acquisition

Poetry can help increase awareness of the sounds and rhythms of the language. It acquaints the learner with a variety of registers or dialects. Compared to other writing genres, it may promote fuller vocabulary acquisition by presenting new words in meaningful contexts, rich with sensory and emotional impact. In addition, I have found that it is often the choice of a specific word, rather than a syntactical structure, which focuses a poem's power and impact, or creates confusion if the sense is slightly off. As a result, learners seem more likely to explore the expressive power of individual words, as well as subtle nuances of word meaning, than in other forms of writing.

Poetry also promotes verbal fluency by allowing for the use of smaller syntactical units, which encourage experimentation and expressive flexibility. Through the use of metaphor, poetry is likely to enhance what Danesi (1992) calls "conceptual

fluency” — i.e., familiarity with how the world is mapped metaphorically in the target language. L2 learners tend to be deficient in this skill, despite the fact that many or even most linguistic concepts are metaphorical in structure. As a result, they generally tend to relate new concepts back to L1 structures, resulting in conceptual discrepancies. According to Danesi, the typical L2 curriculum provides “little or no opportunity to access the metaphorically structured conceptual domains inherent in SL discourse” (1972, p. 491). Finally, the need to express a deeply felt meaning or perception can lead to increased awareness, and hopefully increased retention, of the syntactical and grammatical points needed to achieve successful expression.

Hopefully, the point has been made that poetry offers a goldmine of possibilities for the cognitive, imaginative, creative, personal, and linguistic development of learners at all levels. The next section will give a limited overview of some resources available to those who wish to tap this vast potential for learning.

A Word About Resources

The approach I will describe here is a particular sequence of activities I have developed over the years which, with variations, has worked for me and feels comfortable — but there is also an abundance of other material which could prove at least equally valuable, whether in place of or in conjunction with the methods offered here. A sampling of these is listed in the References section. Many of their ideas overlap in some ways with mine, and probably have influenced them indirectly. This is unavoidable, since while all of the activities included here are original and not taken from printed resources, certain themes are universal to good poetry teaching, such as exploring sensory language, accessing memories, and practice with creating images.

Having said that, I do wish to acknowledge a classic work on poetry in the classroom that provided much of my original inspiration and guidance: *The Inward Ear*, by Maley and Duff (1989). It is a treasure trove of suggestions for exploiting the vast potential which both reading and writing poetry hold for L2 learners from the secondary level on. It contains numerous activities for both individuals and groups, covering such topics as using sensory words, understanding what makes a poem, working with pictures, accessing memories, visualizing, and playing with meanings.

In the “hands-on” department, both the fun and creativity of poetry writing can be greatly enhanced by the use of magnetic poetry sets, available in bookstores. Consisting of individual magnetic words that are moved around on a metal surface, these allow the students to set their imagination free by making unlikely word associations. The results are often quite surprising.

Other than teaching materials, one of the most important resources you can own is a collection of poetry you can get truly excited about reading aloud. While it

shouldn't be so complex that the students will get nothing from it, it should be challenging enough to be interesting and to invite speculation which can help construct meaning. New words can generally wait until after a first reading to be explained, allowing for a gradual unfolding of meaning. Other poems you collect will serve as models for specific activities such as the ones described here. In addition, it is essential to provide a library of poetry books the students can browse through once they have got past the beginning stages. Though it may feel as if they are "not doing anything," it is often very helpful to devote some time to letting them find their own inspiration and points of departure from the poems they most relate to (and this will vary widely). Just make sure they are clear about when credit is due to the author!

One of the most valuable resources of all is the students' own experience – the stories and memories that have shaped their lives and their eagerness to tell them, to be seen and understood. Sometimes, too, poetry gives voice to feelings that are too deep or painful to express any other way. Many refugees from war hold memories of traumas that are beyond the confines of ordinary words; in such cases, poetry is uniquely suited to step in, to catch the unspeakable as it overflows from a mind that has seen too much.

Another infinitely helpful resource is the motivation engendered by being able to tell their stories. While it is not easy to write poetry in a language one hasn't grown up with, as long as their writing is valued and encouraged they will work hard to meet the challenge —and will soon discover that finding just the right word or structure to express a deep feeling, a distant memory, or a subtle perception can be a powerful educational experience as well as an emotional and aesthetic one.

Finally, you may find the best resource of all to be the energy that is engendered when poems are shared and displayed. Few things can match the excitement of a student who, though struggling to read and write at the most basic level, sees her own simple but expressive piece of writing posted on the bulletin board along with her more accomplished — and recognized — peers. While the teacher may have helped with technical polishing or offered a fitting word, there is nothing rudimentary about her ideas and insights — and she takes great pride having that known. The excitement is contagious: others who may have been slow to produce pick up momentum, as they realize that many of those whose work is on display are no better students than they are!

Getting Students to Write Poetry

Here are a series of activities that I found suitable for students who typically have written little or no poetry previously, and often have misconceptions about it.

Finding a Voice

To help students find a voice for their thoughts, I often start by handing out this poem:

THIS IS JUST TO SAY

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold.

I have seen William Carlos Williams' "This is Just to Say" (1983) used in several ways to elicit ideas. Part of what drew me to it is that it is so far from anything most of the students have ever thought of as poetry, and thus is a great springboard for discussing what is and is not poetry. After I distribute the poem I read it out loud, and then ask, "Is this a poem?" Opinions vary, and often they assume that it's a poem because of the way the lines are arranged – in which case my next question is, "If you took a note your mother left you asking you to buy a loaf of bread and arranged it like this, would that be a poem?" Eventually I get them to realize that there is something going on here that doesn't meet the eye — the writer is apologizing, but is secretly glad he ate the plums. I point out how, though some would have considered it a poem in any case, in many poems we have to read between the lines and bring something of ourselves to the reading in order to perceive the subtleties. We discuss how the concept of what a poem is has changed in modern times. Next, I ask them to imagine that they have just found this poem on their kitchen table, and reply to it using the same form — just a few words on each line, divided into stanzas. I tell them it can be any type of response — they can give a direct, straightforward answer, or play with it and be imaginative. Answers run the gamut — and range from forgiving sweetness to angry profanity:

I think you / Were hungry
That is why you / Ate the plums

It's fine / I understand
I will buy more plums from / the supermarket / for breakfast

I forgive you / because it's just some plums
No big deal about this / It's OK.
(Female, Liberia)

First of all I want to know / why you ate my stupid plums?
You just don't know how long / I've been wanting to eat those plums
I feel like you took my heart / out of my chest, girl
And don't even think about making it up to me / because there's nothing
you can do or say to make me feel better. / That was my breakfast.
(Female, Haiti)

Now that the students have a feel for speaking naturally with a new sound and rhythm, I ask them to write to someone else using the same form. It can be someone real or imagined, living or dead: their mother, me, Micky Mouse, Napoleon, or Michael Jackson, just so they really want to say it. It often becomes a small revelation when something that may have been bothering them, or that aroused feelings of anger or guilt, can be made into something beautiful and considered a work of art, — even if a minor one. I generally discourage beginners from trying to rhyme because it tends to inhibit the spontaneity of expression. This is one of the instances when it worked:

FOR THE CHILD OF MY DREAMS

Someday, somehow / I will hold you with all my
heart. / Someday, somehow / I will be there when you need /
that warmest hug. / Somewhere, somehow I will be
the air you need and / the food you're fed with.
Oh, child of my dreams, / I will make the air cool
and I will change this world / for you.
Someday, somehow / I will make you the richest kid
in the world.

(Female, Ethiopia)

Memories

From learning to speak our minds in a new voice we go right to memories – and begin to learn to access the things we really want to speak about. Often I have started with Nikki Giovanni’s (1994) “Knoxville, Tennessee”:

I always like summer / best
you can eat fresh corn / from daddy’s garden
and okra / and greens / and cabbage / and lots of
barbecue / and buttermilk / and homemade ice-cream
at the church picnic / and listen to / gospel music
outside / at the church homecoming
and go to the mountains with / your grandmother
and go barefooted / and be warm / all the time
not only when you go to bed / and sleep

The point here, of course, is sensory detail. Would this have been as interesting if the first part of the poem had read, “I always liked summer because there were lots of good things to eat” — and left it at that? Everyone sees the point. This is the first mention I make of the importance of sensory detail, but by no means the last; I keep up a steady barrage of reminders from this point on. You need to make the point early, and keep hammering it in relentlessly, that probably the single most important key to writing good poetry is to make it concrete, make it real, by using a wealth of tangible details from all of the senses. This is what binds reader to writer, engaging his whole being from the ground up and placing him experientially in the midst of another person’s world.

At this point I hand them a sheet containing several poems about childhood memories, mainly of parents and grandparents. We observe how the mention of just a few simple objects brings us right in, engages our attention, makes us feel as if we are there —and periodically I will paraphrase the poem without those details so the point keeps getting driven home! “Mother’s Biscuits” (excerpted) brings in the element of touch to an unusual degree, along with smell and other senses:

In a big bow she’d fluff in flour, / Make a fist-dent
For buttermilk and lard which she squeezed / Between her fingers
The way a child goes at a mud puddle,
Raking dry flour / From the sides until it mixed right . . .
I’d take some / When leaving late to the schoolbus
And up the road / I’d run, puffing through biscuit crumbs
My haloed breath / Into the skin-sharp morning air.

Freda Quenneville

(1966)

After reading a variety of simple memory poems and identifying the senses they evoke, it is now time for the students to focus on what they are receiving through their own senses. First I ask them to make a “sense list” of impressions they are experiencing at that time in a particular place with a lot going on. Likely choices are the school cafeteria, their own kitchen, a restaurant, a party, etc. Holding a sheet of paper sideways, they make six columns for each of the five senses plus feeling (emotion), which is optional. They are to take this paper with them to the chosen location and jot down sense impressions in each of the columns, in as much detail as possible. It’s not enough to say “a lot of people” — get right down to the nitty-gritty of “a girl in a yellow dress with pink flowers making bubbles with her gum.” They won’t get it right away; usually it takes several generations, with a lot of my refusing to be satisfied and pushing for more and more detail. It can even be an ongoing assignment; check it the first day, then send them back out to add to it. For those who really get into it, it can be great fun.

Next, I assign a sense list from memory. They choose a place in their native country where they spent a lot of time as a child, and make a list using the same categories. As with anything requiring this kind of concentration, I usually let them start it in class – just closing their eyes and relaxing into it — in case some might have trouble finding a quiet enough spot at home. (I also want to make sure they actually do it, since there are always those who are allergic to all new and strange assignments!) Again, the trick is to not necessarily accept what comes at first, but to insist on ever greater detail.

See: My grandmother sits on the bed. She eats the soup with no teeth.
Hear: She gasps for breath. She always mumbles about how she will die soon.
Taste: My grandmother eats salty soup and a sweet apple.
Touch: The bowl of soup on the table is very hot. My hands press her body.
Smell: When she coughs there is a bad smell. Her skin smells a little bit too.
Feel: The sound of her cough makes me cry and love her too much.

Once they have really done this, they are ready to take some of their sense impressions and turn them into a poem in which they remember the past. Although they have the choice of either using material from their list, or finding new ones for the poems, it is always interesting to see the sense list items incorporated into the final result:

MY GRANDMOTHER

My grandmother is sitting / on the bed
With white hair / No teeth / Mumbling / She will die soon.
She looks thin / Gaunt / She's nothing but skin and bones.
What a pity! / When I see her / I am sad / Crying
I always / Want to take care of her
Press her back / Legs / Arms
My hands / Make her smile
Comfortable / Happy.

(Female, Vietnam)

People

At this point the students have gotten a feel for the power of rich sensory detail in evoking a scene from the past. Other people often figure strongly in the scenes they have depicted, as well as in their sense lists — mostly through watching and listening in increasingly unique ways:

Next we take a look at some poems which are actual portraits of particular people — and notice the kinds of images that bring the person right into our presence: Then, with silence and focusing, the students take time to remember those who were closest to them — who inspire the most powerful memories — and invoke their presence using what they have learned about concrete imagery:

THE MAN WHO WALKS AROUND ALL DAY AND NIGHT

The man who walks around / all day and night is innocent
like a newborn baby. / His eyes' colors are like a rainbow.
He likes to play like a little child. / Every day he walks around
the houses looking for a child to play with.
On Sunday morning he takes a walk on the beach;
and he sits on the rock looking at the sea going up and down.
He looks at the birds fly away.
And he looks at the African sunset.

(Female, Liberia)

Metaphor

One thing we have noticed along the way is that many of the most powerful sensory images are not descriptions of “reality” as we know it, but are lies of a sort, fantasies, or ways of talking about things as if they were something else. We discuss how this kind of language can make the reader see something in a whole new way, and find

examples - a particularly good one being Langston Hughes' well-known "Dream Deferred.". They practice finding their own original comparisons (avoiding the clichés everyone has heard before), worded as similes to start with — e.g., "As mad as. . .", "school is like. . ." For many, however, this does not come easily, and it takes much practice and encouragement. I tell them how metaphorical thinking, and visual imagery in general, will help them to become better thinkers. They get my little speech about how reading involves visual thinking and imagination, and how children who grow up watching TV, movies and video games are often limited in imagination, which is related to intelligence in general. Ears perk up, brains shift into a higher gear, and the results are often impressive. This first example finds its inspiration in Langston Hughes:

BROKEN LOVE

What happens to a broken love? / Does it make your life miserable
like an old car, or make you dry / like a river without water?
Or does it break like a pencil, / or like a glass that drops on the floor?
Maybe it's just a feeling that comes and goes -
or does it kill?

(Female, Liberia)

Here is another powerful example of metaphor's ability to express the subtleties of intense emotion:

YOU

My life is a song / Unfinished. . .
You come / Change its tune

My life is a tree in the winter / Stripped of its leaves. . .
You come / Carry the warmth of the Spring

My life is a quiet river / Water flows and ebbs every day
You come / Waves and wind

I am a white mare / Running. . .without target
You are a carpet of green / A blue and pure stream
Make me look back and halt

(Female, Vietnam)

Parents

Many years ago I came across a poem in which the poet describes the early lives of her parents, and thought it would serve as an interesting springboard for getting into the topic of family background. Little did I know what treasures that topic would unearth.

I wonder about the first time / my mom met my dad.
She was walking the forest, / taking water from
the lake, had long hair, / long dress. As she passed
she overwhelmed him with her long hair, / and he called to her.
She started to walk fast; he called her / one more time, then she
looked at him. He said, / "Come, let's walk in the forest together."
Then I imagine / her feeling his face. / He tried to take
the grass from her hair; / it felt like he was picking / roses.

(Female, Liberia)

Parents' stories allow us to share in the intimate personal experiences of those who grew up — and, unlike their children, continued to grow up — in the native country. In addition to being touching stories in their own right, imbued with heartfelt feelings and perceptions that can only arise from the perspective of love, they are a window into the cultural and family traditions that shaped their children's lives.

Haiku

There were years when I never got around to haiku. Those years I was more concerned with calling up memories, expressing feelings, developing a command of rich sensory imagery, exploring identity, etc. But when I did start fitting it in, I realized right away that it contributed some absolutely indispensable elements to the process of learning to write good poetry — i.e., a sense of how important each word was, how much could be conveyed with a very few words, and the heightened impact the rest of the words had when unnecessary words were taken away.

I found a nice way to introduce haiku in *Adventures in Literature (Bronze)* by McClosky and Stack (1996). Students are asked to remember back to a scene in nature they had experienced, and then write about it in a paragraph. After reading three sample haiku and coming to understand the basics of the form, they distill their paragraph down to an essential image. The goal is to stay within the traditional seventeen syllables, but we are flexible:

I like the tree
I like when a bird sits on it
And the wind is flowing around
With love songs

The pink butterfly
Flies toward me
I feel like I am a flower

(Female, Cambodia)

Name Poems

A couple of years ago we were reading *Morning Girl* by Michael Dorris, the beautiful story of a Native American girl and her brother, Star Boy. We discussed how in many cultures people are given names which fit their unique personalities, talents and abilities, or experiences that have affected them deeply. Names can even be given temporarily for healing purposes, to help a person through a crisis by enabling him to perceive himself differently. This area is something many of the students pick up on fairly readily, relating it to their own experiences with nicknames.

The book *The Wishing Bone Cycle* (Norman, 1976) contains many intriguing examples of poems by the Swampy Cree Indians describing how different individuals came to receive their names. After reading examples from the book, I ask the students to write two name poems, one about themselves and the other about someone they know; they can start with either one. As with family history poems, these can take us deep into personal memories which often provide us with beautiful windows into the native culture:

My name is River Water
I love the river because when the / Sun is hot the river
water is cold. . .
My name is River Water
I remember my grandmother / looking at me and laughing
And laughing, because I love water / And I am afraid of water. . .
I love drinking river water early / In the morning like my grandmother
My name is River Water
Now here I am far away from the river.

(Male, Liberia)

While some of the name poems involve the unfolding of personal stories and memories, others can be a way of describing a friend from a new perspective, or conveying a personal insight metaphorically in a concise, haiku-inspired vignette:

I am a Sunflower / I spread incense through / the garden
I am a yellow egg / Around me are green leaves
I have fun / When I bloom in Summer
Showing people / I am a gift of God
I swing in the wind / I am a sunflower
(Female, Bangladesh)

War

Once the students are off and running, you will find a wide variety of poetic forms to explore, and an endless series of topics will present themselves. Of the various possibilities, the subject of war deserves special mention because the poems it inspires have particular impact and poignancy. At least within the population I teach, it is an unfortunate fact that many of the students' clearest and most intense memories have to do with wars they have experienced, either first-hand or through the impact on their families. Most of my African students are refugees from the constant turmoil that kept them on the move, separated their families, and disrupted their education. Many of them were witnesses to violence and death, sometimes involving immediate family members. Cambodians and Vietnamese, while too young to have witnessed these horrors first-hand, are strongly affected by their families' stories.

A number of years ago I used as a model a poem about the war in Bosnia which resonated with the experience of quite a few students. As happened often - but particularly dramatically in this case - they were able to utilize a catalyst in this way to unlock vast stores of powerful, emotionally charged memory:

The young boys, hardly become men, / fighting and shooting guns during the war.
They were shooting / because their brothers and sisters and mothers were dying.
Shooting and fighting with guns they'd never seen before in their lives.
Brother, my brother, was one of the fighters.
His fingers touched what he wasn't supposed to touch.
He got hit by a bullet at the front. No one there to try to stanch the blood.
He tried and tried / to press his wounded leg.
But no one was there / to help him.

(Female, Liberia)

Additional Considerations

Once the students have practiced these methods or similar ones, they will have a solid basis for continuing on to explore new frontiers in poetry writing — if they have been continually prodded into using sharp, detailed, original images, and have gotten used to considering the impact of each word. It also helps to point out how poets use words in unusual ways, and often play with sounds through alliteration and repetition

of lines. Rhyme, while generally too constricting for beginning poets, is yet another element they can experiment with, and throw into the mix on occasion. Beyond that, as long as you continue reading and sharing poetry that strikes a chord with you, you will have an endless wellspring of further ideas for modeling and inspiration; poems students discover during free reading times can contribute ideas as well. It is very important to stay tuned in to what they are responding to — which sometimes means being ready to abandon your own plans, beliefs, and sometimes even tastes, to “go with the flow.”

Quite often, the students will have things on their minds that are burdensome or painful — whether experiences from the present or traumatic events from the past, such as war. Putting such feelings into a poem can not only provide relief and fulfillment for the moment, but can also be a deeply healing process for the long term. Generally, there is an openness to sharing very private thoughts and feelings with classmates that would be difficult to achieve with other forms of writing or other classroom activities. It is also possible to combine poetry with journal writing by allowing a poem to be submitted as an alternative to a regular journal entry, thereby encouraging the use of poetry as a tool for deep personal reflection. There is a whole field called Poetry Therapy which deals with some of the ramifications of using it for healing and growth (Fox, 1997).

You may wonder at times just how much “help” you can offer while still ensuring that the poem is basically the student’s, and not a joint venture. My own feeling is that in addition to correcting mechanics, it is entirely appropriate to help a student find clear wording for a thought or feeling that he would otherwise be unable to express. This can, in fact, be an extremely powerful way for students to internalize points of grammar and usage and become aware of subtle nuances of word meaning — and we need to always be on the lookout for such learning opportunities. If a point isn’t clear, or if a word seems not quite right, dig — find out what the student is really trying to say. The payoff can be enormous.

A word needs to be said about the issue of grading poetry. Obviously, it would be counter-productive to reserve the highest grades for poems that could be published in a literary journal. Effort must pay off if motivation is to be maintained, and those with minimal literacy skills who nevertheless try their best need to be rewarded. For the most part I award credit through other means than number of letter grades. The main criterion is whether they have tried to do what they were asked to do — i.e., how much effort and imagination they put into doing what the assignment called for. I am rather fussy about this since I feel it is essential to master specific skills at particular times in order to get the full benefit of the process. If they came up with something good that is not what I assigned, I praise it and give them credit for an “extra” poem, while still requiring them to do the one assigned. I allow for some exceptions, such as for a student who really enjoys working within a particular style,

or another who has a hard time grasping figurative language, but continues to write in other ways. To keep track of who has done what, I find it helpful to number the assignments rather than have to figure out which is which.

In order to keep the process going and derive the maximum benefit from it in terms of motivation and continued progress, it is essential to either publish student work or display it on bulletin boards or around the classroom. This validates their efforts, helps them see themselves as both competent writers and creative artists, and brings others “out of the woodwork” in an attempt to see if they can do something worth sharing as well.

Conclusion

Our mission is to prepare our students for the future — and in today’s dizzying, high-tech, information-glutted world, this is a lot harder than it used to be. The constant influx of new data and concepts requires a whole new array of processing tools for those who would hope to keep up — and the gap keeps widening between those who are equipped for this task and those who will be left behind.

Not many people — educators or others — would consider poetry to be one of the requisite tools for dealing with the stringent demands of the information age. Yet, it is clear to me that it has a unique potential for building higher-order concepts, for fostering synthetic thinking based on patterns and networks, and for stimulating creativity, originality, and imagination — the very kinds of skills that are most needed and sought-after today by employers and universities.

Since language and thought are inextricably interwoven, developing good, creative thinking is part and parcel of developing skillful, conceptually rich linguistic ability. Another crucial aspect of this is flexibility: learning to respond to subtle inner impulses, and follow their thought processes into unusual places, rather than always following set forms,

Henry Widdowson (1992, p. 82) has argued for recognizing poetry’s ability to break the linguistic and conceptual status quo:

Poetry is always in some sense a denial of authority and a celebration of divergence. As such it encourages the kind of scepticism, recognition relative validity, and critical scrutiny of established modes of thought and expression which, I have argued, it should be the purpose of education to develop.

What we are really talking about here is the ability of poetry to promote fluency, which I see as the ability to use language to respond to whatever new demands life presents — whether in the area of work, academic study, interpersonal communication, personal writing, or even inner dialogue. Fluency entails becoming flexible enough on a variety of levels to become one’s own person, to listen to one’s

own voice and learn to speak with it, to perceive the world freshly rather than through stale concepts. It is the ability to be real in one's thinking, feeling, writing, and being. It is an invaluable tool for any time, any place, but particularly for today's complex, rich, ever-changing, brave new world.

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