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## Poetry connections

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It's 7:30 in the morning on a typical early January day in northeastern Ohio, one of those dreary mornings when the night seems to shadow the day. We're on our way to do poetry with students at Pleasant View School for the Arts. We have been drawn to this place because we knew that poetry would be accepted here and that experimentation was not only welcomed, but expected. We've been at this school for several months, leaving the comfort of our offices at the university to make sense of a process of literature. In educational jargon, we are serving as ethnographers, which puts us in the position of studying classroom culture from the inside out. Compared to the academic environments that we're coming from, we could very well be visiting and tracking the cultural patterns that unfold in a small village. It's nice to have the transition of the drive in a yet-to-be-warmed-up van to finalize our plans and get into our roles as middle school teachers. Two teachers, one in an eighth grade drama class and the other in a sixth grade social studies class, have literally turned their classrooms over to us. We have exactly thirty-two minutes with these kids, and we have no special privileges as outsiders in this school.

We made a decision long before we began this project to avoid traditional discussion of poetry. Often, what poses as discussion is too often a closed system of question-asking which can be stifling, to say the least. From our experiences in elementary and secondary classrooms as well as in our university classes, we know that it is possible to talk too much about poetry without actually doing anything with it or about it. What we intended to do was to give the language of poetry such a clear

voice in the classroom, that our students would instill the poems with meaning.

It's only natural that we wanted to spend a lot of time questioning poetry. After all, it is a form of communication that tends to work its wonder and its magic by indirection. While poetry's delightful ambiguity and density are part of its charm, those same qualities encourage the kind of labored dissection that generates boredom. We wanted poetry's ripe language to awaken a whole range of feelings. We wanted our students to be captivated by the "word" by interpreting it through art, drama, and movement. What we set our sights on was a collaborative enterprise whereby meaning is negotiated rather than superimposed, where understanding follows personal engagement. When we did engage in discussion with the students, we tried to make it an open forum so that the emphasis was on experiencing the poem in a subjective and objective way - from the inside out and the outside in. To encourage our students to do this, we would combine a Reader Response approach to the poems and an approach that would also motivate us to look closely at textual details and the poet's techniques (Andrasick, 1990). For us, the text did not contain a ready-made meaning, but was a compass pointing the way toward meaning (Rosenblatt, 1993). Our business as teachers was to help our students evoke meaning, or as Rosenblatt asserts, summon it up like con-jurers. The reader - any reader - thus summons up unique meaning, one that emerges from the special transaction between this reader and this text this time around (Rosenblatt, 1993). What emerges from the transaction is an actual and a virtual text, the poem put to paper and one that now exists in the soul of the reader.

One other aspect of our journey was an exploration of various cultures. The following questions guided us: Would the kids take to poetry at all? What kinds of poetry would really interest them? What kinds of activities would foster rich experiences with poetry? How far into cultural understanding could these poems take us? When we initiated this project, we thought of ourselves as literary anthropologists (Mead, 1953). In a sense, we were going into a school as cultural outsiders, but when we joined the kids, we would all be outsiders because we were looking into poems that were from so many different cultures. How would we act as foreigners? Would we stay awhile and enjoy the territory? And what would we be like once the journey ended? Would the students begin to think like poets?

Poetry is demanding for the reader, for the writer, and for the teacher. It is sharp-edged wonder, compactness, succinctness, opacity, and intense structure. It is a balancing act among various interpretations of realities and “a combination of linguistic and musical ability” (Schwartz, 1995, p. 30). Furthermore, it is not a genre that we expect middle schoolers to take to easily. As Cummings (1995) notes:

For children teetering on the brink of adolescence, their intellectual and emotional development predisposes them to a symbolic exploration of the world through their passions...the poem affords students the opportunity to articulate their feelings and judgments about experiences outside their ego-restricted view of reality. (p. 11)

Janezko (Bloem, P.L. & Manna, A. L., 1997) observes that poetry is “rebellious” (p. 15); and so are adolescents. Poetry could also be called “language with attitude.” With these ideas in mind, the connections between poetry and young adults should be natural ones.

Our role as researchers since the beginning of October, then, has been to provide some basic structures for the students in an effort to encourage improvisation of response through our orchestration of the activities. On this particular day in January, the eighth grade students are all over the floor, all over the room, reading poetry. The assignment we give them today is to find a poem they really like, read it aloud and choose a favorite line to respond to and interpret. One kid rejects our selections and runs off to his locker to get a

school anthology, an old textbook where he tells us he can find his favorite poem. He’s got “Saturday Night” by Langston Hughes (in Lampersand, 1994) and he tells us how much he likes poems that are written in dialect. Another student runs to his locker and comes back with a homemade anthology of favorite poems. He tells us that his favorite poem is John Hartford’s “Word Movies” (Doubleday 1971). “Who is John Hartford?” we ask, and he becomes our enthusiastic informant at this point. He’s a little surprised by our ignorance. After all, we are college teachers, and we’re supposed to know everything.

### **IN THE BEGINNING: MOVING FROM SOUND TO SENSE**

On our first day at the school in October, we enter with anticipation, wondering how we will fit in as outsiders. The first class we visit is the eighth grade. These students sit with their adolescent shields firmly in place, not knowing what to expect. They eye us up and down, and there are questions written all over their faces. We plunge in with “I’m Sorry, Said the Machine,” Eve Merriam’s (in Krogness, 1994) anti-technology poem about the negative consequences of technology in a world where machines have become the dominant deity. We love this poem, and, since our focus is to explore various images of culture, it seems an apt place to begin. The poem is not only short, but it’s also accessible to eighth graders. It brings up issues of social problems, which interests them, and it has a defiant tone that mirrors the adolescent temperament. Finally, it lends itself to meaningful drama.

We have been told that the students have been doing some choral reading with poetry from their textbooks. The eighth graders put on a reading demonstration for us, but their presentations of the poems lack enthusiasm for the language and the meanings of the poetry. They are not really dramatizing the poems as much as reading them by rote with an occasional lift or drop of the voice to add some emphasis. We believe that some authentic dramatic experiences will help to draw the students into the poetry and out in their presentations. Our instructional theory here matches that of Mayhoe and Parker (1988):

There are three powerful justifications for using drama to explore poetry. Firstly, workshop activities extend the time over which students are involved with each particular poem... Secondly, there is the advantage of direct pupil involvement in practical activity and problem-

solving... Physical involvement with ideas is likely to involve [adolescents] more successfully than more cerebral approaches alone... Thirdly, and most important, by enacting the experience they project their whole selves into it. In the process, not just the head but the heart will be involved as their experience of the world is extended and shaped. (p. 63)

We start with scripting the poem for choral reading. We use a “layered” approach which involves beginning with a purposefully neutral, voiceless reading and moving slowly, experimenting with ways to hear the poem. The reason for this is to set the poem and to set the readers up to get them inside what Rosenblatt calls the “live circuit” (p. 25). We believe that it is important to articulate the poem orally and that this will allow us to hear in a tangible way the voices that are embedded in the poem. By doing these things, we hope to resuscitate the poem by bringing the words off the page and instilling them with life. We mean to take this literally. We feel that by the “doing” the poem, meaning will follow. This not only makes the kids aware of but also attentive to how poetry works. These eighth graders respond to the technological culture in the poem with their own experiences with machine voices. Today, they are asked what technologies in their own world the poem reminds them of. They give us a litany of mechanical phrases from answering machines and telemarketing machines which anticipates the human voices in the poetry we will analyze later with them.

The following week involves students taking the idea of poem as script and using various lines of poetry to create tableaux that first involve mime, then sound, then action. According to Mayhoe and Parker (1988), D. W. Harding called this process “‘feeling comprehension,’ where physical, emotional and intellectual responses are simultaneously engaged” (p. 72). Although the eighth graders are hesitant at first to perform in front of their classmates, they are soon drawn into the activities and are providing us with inside information about their personal interpretations. We know this because of what they do with a concept or a character in the poem, what kinds of dialogue and sounds they add, and how they choreograph their bodies to express meaning. They are involved in deep symbiotic relationships with the poem that were not evident in their earlier choral reading performances.

The sixth graders are a bit less cynical than their older counterparts when we first visit their social studies classroom today, but are less than thrilled with the prospect of studying poetry. We begin with a lesson that will take several days to complete, opening with an overhead of three Native American poems, each one represented by an arbitrary symbol that we have drawn. A discussion ensues concerning the way that poetry distills language and how it takes ideas and presents them in their most economic form. We also talk about how this same concept applies to visual images (the picture-being-worth-a-thousand-words idea) which leads us nicely to the next activity.

We distribute colored construction paper, large sheets of white newsprint and glue and tell the students to construct an image out of torn paper that reflects an important part of one of the poems on the overhead. They must tear the paper because at this point we want them to forget the rules about being neat. They must choose colors that represent certain emotions and ideas that they want to convey, and their images may be either abstract or representational. The important thing at this point is that the images represent in a compact form a larger idea. As they create, we walk around the room, commenting on the surprises that we find and fielding questions. David raises his hand: “I don’t think I did it right. I made a border. Is this OK?” We assure him that different is good in poetry and in visual art. We applaud his creativity and courage to move outside of the lines. This answer satisfies him and he goes on.

When we return to this classroom a week later, we read the poems on the overhead again, and we review our discussion about the poems’ meanings. As the students recall their original ideas for their torn paper images, they begin to talk about why they chose their ideas and how they developed their images. After showing several pieces to the group and asking for feedback about the ideas represented, we ask them to write down their prose descriptions. They all want to try to guess what their classmates were thinking when they made their images, and they enjoy surprising each other with insights and humor. They find that several of them have taken the same idea (“Old Man Winter” coming over a hill to bring a new season to the people) and have presented it in various ways, from the serious look at Old Man Winter killing plants as he goes along to the mischievous image of a winter sprite with big feet who stamps out summer. They begin to learn about theme and variation from

this, and we're on our way to thinking about how intertextuality works.

From their prose descriptions, we ask them to take three nouns and three verbs that will be used to make a poem from the prose. This is difficult, because there are rules here for the poetry—no counted syllables, no rhyme scheme or definite pattern. All they have is their idea and six words to represent it. Some choose to stay with those six words only, but others find it necessary to add words. In this lesson, anything goes. We want them to experiment with the words as they played with the torn paper—a free form with few guidelines, but a structure that comes from within the artist. In spite of their struggles, they create poems that they feel comfortable with. We read some of them together, and marvel at their profundity. The students, by this time, ask when we'll be back next. They may not “like” poetry, but they like what we do with it. Janeczko (1999) suggests this movement between prose and poetry as an accessible way into poetry writing for students. Lies (1993) believes that children need to experiment with prose and poetry connections because “both call for imagination and creativity to arrive at an original thought and to formulate that thought... In both exposition and poetic writing, the subject matter and the writer's individual voice, knowledge, and experience work together to shape the structure and guide all the author's decisions” (p. 4).

Now our research planning sessions take on new dimensions. We are seeing the students begin to relate to poems, and their responses have given us motivation to keep going. We know that we have learned more and more to let the kids go, to be more in control of their own learning because their ideas are so rich and they have a lot on their minds that they are willing to share. We wonder now if we aren't more of a hindrance than a help, but we realize that we have become part of the community of learners. We have entered into the process with the students, so we decide to give them more strategies in which they can express themselves freely. As Mayhoe and Parker (1988) point out, “teacherless groups can achieve a high level of critical analysis through free discussion of a poem and what seems important to them in it” (p. 38). This has become quite evident in our students' work.

### SPINNING OUT

By the first of the year, we realize that we've seen a deepening, an awakening of the voice within in the

classrooms we now consider ourselves part of. The kids express their responses, the feelings and thoughts the poems evoke. Their feelings and thoughts are increasingly summoned and brought out into the classroom community. When Audrey, a sixth grader, writes a line of poetry that states “I alone can feel my soul,” she shows herself to be a truly metaphorical thinker. We know that poetry is happening in the lives of these kids.

We are becoming more a part of their learning as we go. We join in their dramatizations and we loosely guide the art and writing. We model what can be done and what can't, and we realize that they are better at some things than we are. They are seeing adults as part of the creativity struggle, and the process is a shared one. The modeling isn't forced; rather, it's a state of being with the kids, experiencing the poetry along with them as learners and seekers. We do, after all, have meaning to make. Experiencing goes from decoding, or cracking the poetic code, to moving through a dense vision of words and ideas that work more like a meditation than a brief prosody of description.

The classroom research has now become a poetry ritual. It's like a liturgy that has form, but there is freedom within the form. The students start to take to the way of the poet. How do we know this?

The eighth graders ask to read poetry now as a performing art. They have begun to use props in their tableaux and the presentations take on more dramatic flair. They get into small groups according to their poetry interests, choose particular lines that they like and create visual images for them. The images are minimal and abstract, full of symbolic geometric designs with a bit of representational art thrown in. These images not only reflect the lines of poetry themselves, but they show us how the reader took the poem into his or her own life, moving it from the page to the world outside of school. They write individual lines of poetry on strips of paper and explore what the lines mean to them. Shanna chooses a poem about jazz and picks out a line that asks for the musicians to play it some more. Shanna writes, “This line means that the people at the club want to hear more jazzy music to dance to. I like this line because it adds to the effect of a club on a Saturday night.”

In the sixth grade, we divide the class into three groups and give each group a book of poetry. One book is a collection of Native American poems, another deals with city life, and another is a book of African American poetry. We ask the groups to

skim through the poems to look for poems that they liked. Their assignment is to choose a poem by group consensus that they will present to the class in dramatic form. There is much discussion as they choose their poems. Some of the children are noncommittal, but most of them are passionate about their choices. The group consensus isn't easy, but they finally reach compromise in each group. They try to articulate why they chose the poems that they did, but they lack the vocabulary. Common reasons are: "I liked the character in the poem," "I liked the illustrations that went with it," or "I don't know—it just sounds nice."

In our next session, we read again the poems that they have chosen. Each group chooses a member to read to the whole group, and our discussion takes an interesting turn. It appears that the groups have all chosen poems that deal in some way with individuality and community. Given the topics of the books from which they were choosing, this is not surprising. However, it is a revelation to the students that all three poems deal in some way with an invitation to be part of a group, or to be an individual within a group. From here, we are able to make connections to what we've already said about the nature of life in a pluralistic society. We see that the common tension in all societies is and has been between the needs of the group and those of individuals in the group. With this in mind, they develop tableaux to depict scenes that will express the unique contribution of their group's poem to this idea. Their "body pictures" express the arrogance of a little mouse that thinks that he owns the world, the joy of a child who celebrates her uniqueness, and the warning of a group of children to others to stay away from their space because it is too dangerous.

The following week, we review again, and get the kids back into their groups. Today, we ask them to write a word, phrase or sentence on a strip of paper that will later be made into a class poem. However, we provide some form so that one group will be writing about being an individual, one about being in a group, and one group will write invitations or calls to others to join their community. We take these strips with us and play with them at home, turning them into various poems. The process is not easy, because we want the poem to have some type of organization; yet, we are faced with twenty-odd paper strips that are written by twenty-odd unique individuals. We finally find a form that we like, and we take it back to read it to the class. The teacher gasps when we read it. She's

overwhelmed at its implications because she knows the kids and she recognizes the voices and the hearts from which these words have come.

The students are impressed, but they know that they could do just as well. So we give them the chance. Again, they divide into groups. We put the strips into paper bags, and each student pulls out a strip. Each group must now create a poem from the strips they've chosen from the bag. This takes some concentration. Kids are in circles, on the floor, under desks, on top of desks, hanging the strips from their glasses, plastering them on their foreheads. We tell them that once they agree on a form for their poem, they must create a tableau. This time, we let them combine movement and sound with the drama. They have been wanting this; it's been difficult for them to say everything that they want to say in silence.

Their presentations are wonderfully expressive. One group chooses to do a wave motion while reading the poem. This is preceded by a march down the center aisle to the tune of the Sesame Street theme song. When they are asked why they chose to present the poem this way, they are unsure. "It just seemed to make sense," Jennifer tells us. "We didn't really put the poem together in a logical way, but it sounds right to us the way we have it." And the wave? "We just wanted to do it. I don't know why we did the Sesame Street song. I guess we just like it." We point out to her that there are connections here, that the wave is a group act that depends on the cooperation of each individual, and that the Sesame Street song is an invitation to be part of a group. "Everything is connected, Jennifer," we say. "Weird," replies Jennifer. Weird, perhaps. But truly a cathartic moment for Jennifer and for all of us when we realize how profound this poetry experience has been.

#### **CHILDREN AS POETS: SPINNING IN**

We believe that these students became poets, or, at least, poet-like. We don't want to be overzealous romantics, but in a real sense, these students were poets because they expressed the characteristics of poetry. They focused on dominant impressions from words and visual images and sought to make meaning from these images in their own poetry and art. They collaborated in the creative process with other "poets" so see how public and private meaning systems interact. They worked in a poetic frame of mind. There was constant movement in and out of the poems and the cultural characteristics enmeshed in them. Sometimes they found themselves in the

poems and sometimes they didn't. But in all of the poetry they heard voices and responded back to them. The poems were the vehicles that drove them.

None of the constructs and the writing that accompanied them presented "safe" interpretations by staying close to the topic or tone of the original poems. For most of the sixth grade students, interpretation became an occasion for spinning out and away from the poet's ideas and the art/writing integration for fashioning a new experience. Audrey's take on "With These Hands I Have Held" did this. Both her spare writing and minimalist torn-paper collage pondered the significance of the experiences that fill a life. The narrative that explains the illustration and the illustration itself juxtapose the ordinary and the mystical in a wonderfully thoughtful way. Her thoughts about her illustration go deep:

It is important to remember the times you had,  
not only in winter but every day. These are the  
hands of our lives.

It's hard to forget the one-line poem that caps her project, particularly in the way the poem helps to reveal the drama of the incident she depicts in her collage: the hunter's bullet has found its mark in the deer that is flung into the air from the bullet's force. We cannot help but think that Audrey's stark, one-line poem is rich in implication, suggestion, and moral questions:

The hands are killing  
and are living to tell.

While Jennifer's interpretation of "Old Man Winter" is less abstract than is Audrey's of "With These Hands," it is just as moving. Jen's collage is bold, robust, and energetic in that her Old Man Winter bursts out of the frame and the pieces of the setting—snow-capped mountain, mountain animal, falling snowflakes—have been rendered larger than life. What's so interesting about Jen's reconstruction of the poem is the thoughtful contrast she creates between the forcefulness of her illustration and the oddly quiet, laid-back tone of her writing. Her poem sounds and feels like a haiku, its simplicity arcing toward a satisfying and wise observation about nature's design:

Old Man Winter  
Creeping

Over the  
Mountain  
Animals Freezing  
As Snow is Falling.

These examples demonstrate what we believe about the process of writing poetry, that writing and art in concert lead to a constellation of meaning, and the concern for the author's intended meaning becomes a moot point. By experiencing poetry in writing, drama and art, these students were led to their own meanings and expressed them as poets do.

### CHILDREN AS CRITICS

On one of our last visits with the sixth graders, we decide to engage them in poetry conversations—having them read poems and "converse" with the poets by writing their questions, responses, and interpretations in the margins. We move into this by modeling, again, and carrying on verbal conversations with Cynthia Rylant as a whole class as we work through several of her poems in **Waiting to Waltz** (1984). The students take to this quickly, and move into their private dialogues with little guidance.

The students are again allowed to choose the poems to which they will respond. They are attracted to Rylant's work, perhaps because **Waiting to Waltz** has been our touchstone book. But they also are intrigued by Robert Frost, David McCord, Joyce Carol Thomas, Myra Cohn Livingston, Gwendolyn Brooks and various tribal poetry from North America. We give them time to read through their poems quietly, then we begin to roam the room, watching as they write, stopping to talk with individual students who are stuck or who seem to be on a particularly good roll. We ask them why they chose their poem, how they decided to write what they have in the margins, and discuss interpretations with them, helping them to see their own metacognitive processes as they think aloud with us. Their responses are thoughtful, and their voices are clearly audible in what they've written in the margins. Jordan writes, in response to Rylant's embarrassing moment of missing a word in her poem "Spelling Bee," "What was going through your mind when you did this? Was it when you get smarter and learn big words, you forget smaller easier ones? That was what I think you were thinking. Were you ever in a pickle like that? I was once, but I forget the word." Heather responds to

Rylant's "Little Short Legs" by empathizing with the author: "I can relate. It is hard for me to understand that my parents are human too, and they do make mistakes." To Frost's poem, "Doors," Ashley writes, "This has to do with friendship. The open door is someone who wants to be your friend, the shut door is someone who doesn't. If you shut the door, you end the relationship, if you open it you want to start one. A couple of years ago this girl sat on the bus with me. I wanted to talk to her (open a door, though it's closed) but I was shy. I finally did, and now we're best friends." And, finally, Scott wrote to Myra Cohn Livingston in response to "There was a Place," "Did you have a secret place? Was it near a tree? Is your dad still around or did you just think of this person? I had a special spot with my grandpa in his garden. I think it related to this poem because he's not around anymore either." Thus, the poetry dialogues become yet another way for students to think, reflect and express their ideas (Mayhoe and Parker, 1988).

### CONCLUSIONS

This experience with poetry and students taught us much. We learned that children need time and each other and the freedom to respond in order to function well in poetry. They don't always need teachers to tell them what the poem means or how it is put together. We also learned that it is a difficult thing to get into the culture of someone else, to understand fully what it means to be part of another group. But we found out that making the effort counts for something. It's worth the risks to leave our comfort zones and explore humanity through poetry, working as literary anthropologists, and learning more of ourselves in the doing. Perhaps Menka Misheff, one of our teaching assistants, said it best:

What does poetry do?  
 It opens doors  
 breathes inspiration  
 pulls dances out of us  
 seeks voices left unsung  
 charters voyages  
 into self  
     beyond  
 self  
 unveiling.  
 The curtain goes up  
 breathe in                   the sound  
 breathe out                the picture  
 relax  
 let loose

sway to  
 See

the rhythm  
 the treasure?

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