

# For the love of poetry ♦♦♦

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Examining convictions  
about teaching and learning
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of English language learners



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## Poetry: Going wild in the classroom

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I used to place poetry around my classroom like potted silk geraniums or philodendrons. I would set it out to perk up the room in between novel studies and composition assignments. It provided natural-like spontaneity for my classroom. Periodically, I would tend to it and redirect my students to its loveliness. But most of the time, I left it constrained in its hanging baskets to collect dust until I needed another refreshing escape from the curriculum.

Poetry, however, is unconfined. Like exotic animals, it cannot be domesticated. We must learn to live with it on its own terms and transform our classrooms into a natural realm where it can truly flourish. Instead of showcasing poetry as a zoo exhibit with words placed neatly in cages along concrete pathways, we must create a wilderness reserve where language roams freely, enticing us to join in search of imagery and metaphor. My classroom is still undergoing change (it is becoming wilder), but, most importantly, I am undergoing change. I am no longer a zookeeper. I am becoming a safari guide.

As a high school English teacher, I would reverently teach poetry with the distance of an idol worshipper in awe of the masters' otherworldly abilities. As an eighth grade language arts teacher, I reduced poetry to its most simplistic forms in order to squeeze limerick writing or humorous rhyme recitations into my lesson plans. It obeyed my ignorance and performed the menial tasks that I assigned. I tried to tame poetry. Students were familiar with this sort of poetry experience. It was comfortable. No matter what I tried, however, po-

etry never really took root in my room. All this would change when I got involved in a project at The Ohio State University in Marion, Ohio, called Writing That Connects.

### DISCOVERING THE POET WITHIN

Writing That Connects was a project that centered on poetry in the classroom as a means for teachers and students to experience poetry in various ways, to discover the writer within themselves, and to share a creative space together in the classroom. The project included autumn workshops on poetry for teachers, a week-long winter residency with poet Terry Hermsen, and a spring field trip and poetry-reading night. I got involved with the sole purpose of getting an educational cup of espresso. I thought that I would acquire a repertoire of poetry lessons that would easily fit in with my established files and fill a spot in my lesson plans from time to time. Instead Terry informed those of us assembled on the first day that we would become poets ourselves and share the experience with our students as fellow writers. This startling announcement made me squeamish, but I was captivated nonetheless. I had no idea how this would end up, but I suspected that I would become somewhat changed, the stereotypical understatement.

In the three years that I was involved (1996-97; 1997-98; and 1999-2000), I found my poetic self. I also began to slowly transform my classroom into the environment of my elusive dreams. Up until this time, I believed that poetry was a secret language that few knew how to speak or a gated community to which only the privileged held keys. I would marvel at the masters or frolic in silly rhyme - solo or with my students - knowing all the while that I was poetry's outsider.

It took only three workshop sessions in my first year with Writing That Connects to become completely mesmerized by poetry's creative power and feel a natural ability beginning to stir within me. Terry showed the open door to the poet's world. I felt welcomed into a lush, green park where everyone is invited. Likewise, within ten minutes of his first residency in my 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts classes, he had my students spellbound and eager to delve into poetry. Well, everyone but Paul.

As Terry introduced himself and the world of poetry, he stood near a collection of curious items. These oddments (a car engine part, antlers, snake skin, crimped Slinky, crusty paintbrush, worn baseball glove, and a glass jar of milkweed fluff) were his enticements to connect students with the world

around them - to see, hear, smell, taste, feel - and use metaphor to describe their experience. For one exercise, Terry encouraged the students to express themselves in a "Sometimes I feel like..." poem. After reading a number of poems to them, he gave time to write.

During the ensuing quiet, Paul begrudgingly wrote. When he had finished it, he eagerly waved me over and proudly presented me with his negative assessment of Terry's residency so far.

#### Sun's Lament

Sometimes I feel like a sun wasting strength and  
time for useless reasons  
All my efforts fail and perish into dust along with  
my words  
I can think of better ways of not blowing my  
time  
Into blazing balls of burning gases...

Paul Hart (**Still I Thirst**, 90)

I complimented him on his metaphorical language and urged him to share the poem with Terry. Then I moved on to read another student's poem. Terry, who did not pick up on Paul's hidden insult, gave the piece high praise. This must have really sent Paul into a mental tailspin because he looked from the paper to Terry and back to the paper again. Suddenly his face changed. Excitedly he wrote until the end of the class period and finished a second poem. From that moment on, Paul had discovered at least one thing that he did enjoy in school: writing poetry. He had found his voice and would use it from then on.

Similar phenomena occur in my classroom as students discover their own way to communicate through poetry. There is a freedom with poetry that allows even the most struggling language arts students to express what would otherwise remain locked up inside of them. Take away the prerequisites for prose and the conventions of composition, and students' thoughts flow almost effortlessly out of the ends of their fingers. Give students the opportunity to develop their poetic voices, and they will use it in their other writing as well. They will begin to notice imagery and figurative language in the stories, novels, and plays read in class.

With Terry as mentor, I discovered my own metaphorical being. I became part of the poet's world. At this point, I realized that I had always possessed the ability to speak this language. I had merely forgotten how. I understood that poetry is our natural language - the tangible, metaphorical

language of our childhood. Access to this realm was as natural as a child's explanation of a new experience. Once I knew that being a poet meant rediscovering metaphor as the connection between the world and me, it became my duty to guide my students through their own discovery. The transformation in me began that first year with Writing That Connects and continues every day in my classroom. Like Terry, I try to be a mentor to my students as they wander around the natural literary reserve that I am trying to create in my classroom.

This is no task for the status quo, but it is rewarding beyond any teaching experience I have ever had. I have become a risk-taker, content with not always knowing where poetry will lead. Sometimes there is riotous success; other times there is fizzling failure. But all of these experiences help transform the classroom from a neatly time-segmented, lesson-sequenced place into intriguing, language-rich encounters. Unfortunately, there is no preordained set of lessons or a stone tablet of "how to's" for ensuring poetic karma. The conditions needed to coax language from students are simple and tangible, but sometimes slippery.

### TRANSFORMING THE CLASSROOM

First and foremost, the teacher must become a poet, one with his or her students, in the language excursions. **Poemcrazy** offers a plethora of ruminations, insights, and exercises that allow each individual to find those places where poetry lies in his or her life. Wooldridge (1996) makes it very clear that no one can be taught to write poetry. Rather she talks about cultivating a fertile field from where poetry may grow inside and all around us. She also asserts that becoming a poet is not a requirement for tilling our soul through writing discoveries. Each chapter takes the novice farmer through a single poet's life of language, misadventures, and epiphanies and provides opportunities for sowing his or her own acres of imagination. I have used this book as an almanac for my own writing and its exercises as bases for classroom lessons.

Wooldridge's ideas really appeal to me because it taps that part of me that always wanted freedom but did not know how to escape. Even before Terry helped me find the open door to poetry, I was dabbling with weird exercises in my classroom. I will still hand out a word bank sheet with neat words such as: strawberry, gypsy, watermelon, diamonds, waterfall, and dazzle. Then I have students add their own favorite nouns or verbs and encourage them to use as many as possible in creating unique lines.

Eventually, we have quite an array of lovely sounding lines and images that stir our imaginations. Students like this sort of exercise once they get the hang of it. But something this "out there" was difficult for Brittany to deal with. She has mastered the "do's and don't's" of school and is the ideal teenager. Her furrowed brow would often undermine her perpetual smile and easy-going nature. She and I agreed that I was quite the disrupter of her steady educational progress as I proved on the day I pulled out my art transparencies.

I turned off the lights and left the drapes open so that the room was subdued. Then I told the students just to write ideas, feelings, or images that the artwork evoked. Ever since Terry's influence, I now will add specifics for the 5 – 8 minutes given for each piece of artwork, such as: "Write from the viewpoint of someone/thing in the painting," or "Describe the feeling depicted in this painting using an old comparison with your own twist to it," or "Go into to the painting and ask questions." By the time we were finished with the art transparencies that day, Brittany had taken off her shoes and cooled her bare feet in my room's natural spring.

### Mixed Emotions

How dare you stand in an antique vase all day?  
Doesn't it make your emerald stems wrinkled?  
I know you love to be the center of attention  
sitting on the tea table as the guests arrive.  
Phenomenal blotches of color appears on the  
top of your stems.  
How do you do that?  
It must be nice to change colors during seasons,  
from green to brown and brown to green.  
As I look inside you I see more than flowers in a  
vase, I see a garden that never ends.

Brittany Troutman (**Orb** 2001, 82)

As the teacher becomes more comfortable with this new way of writing, he or she is now able to create the classroom environment that will enable students to succeed with unfamiliar forms and fail in a supportive environment. The classroom must have a viable space and time for language expression in its many styles. Poetry is an end in itself, a finished literary achievement. However, it also becomes part of the cadence of student prose and the appreciation for literary diversity. While reading **Sunrises and Songs**, I entered a classroom where nurturing and creative expression transformed a group of fifth and sixth graders into

poets. McClure (1990) recounts her year in the split grade classroom of Peggy Harrison and Sheryl Reed. These teachers' passions for poetry created a community of poetry readers and writers and an oasis for delving into the particulars of poetic elements. Their classroom is a "model" of how a classroom can give value to student voice and where poetry is a key to educational success. In addition to being inspired by these teachers' efforts, I am encouraged to try some of the lesson ideas presented and use the poetry texts cited.

Poetry defies our traditional, linear mode of education. Poems beg us to read them over and over again, to repeat a line, or to get a phrase stuck in our heads. All of this with the sole purpose of bringing us back to the poem again. With each new reading, a new thrill. A deeper insight. A different perspective. The desire to create our own nonlinear reality in the rhythm of lines. Once we realize that we have all been born with this gift, poetry becomes demystified and rolls off of our tongues as it did when we were learning language and putting our point of view into words for the very first time. Poetry is not tame. That is why it eludes most of us. But if we allow ourselves to enjoy it in its natural environment, it will nuzzle our palms.

The key to creating a writer's classroom is the teacher's willingness, dedication, and ability to approach teaching in a whole new way that allows writing to develop from the inside of the student out. He or she must not depend upon textbook chapters (delineations of grammar and mechanics) to dictate the mode, model, and mood of writing. The teacher of writing must be a writer. To accomplish this metamorphosis, the teacher should practice the ideas proposed in **Teaching Writing from a Writer's Point of View** (1998). This collection of essays by writers of various backgrounds (classroom teachers, college professors, published authors and poets) provides insight into the teaching of writing from the writer's viewpoint. These varied essays cover writing from poetry to stories to plays. Each one of them gives encouragement while offering some practical examples of how one's classroom can be transformed into an environment open to divergent thinking and creative language. These very accounts become mirror images of my classroom as I attempt, fail, then try again to entice the wildness out of myself as well as my students.

Poetry has become a way for me to let loose and escape from the confines of standardized teaching without losing focus on teaching valuable

knowledge, skills, and techniques. Word choice, spelling, context, imagery, figurative language, draft writing, and revision all have become a part of the poetry cycle in which my students and I play with language and stretch ourselves in ways we never would have been able to. They enjoy what they were convinced would be as pleasant as cleaning their bedrooms. No class has applauded the introduction of poetry in my classroom with unanimous enthusiasm. In fact, they predictably groan on cue and initially create imitations of greeting card verse. Yet they eventually experience success in a phrase or line or imagery that opens up the world of poetry to them. They often gravitate to its form whenever I give an open writing assignment in response to something that we have done in class. Many begin putting their newly acquired figurative language and imagery in their prose pieces as well. Tentative steps into the unknown become confident explorations as students discover their own world of words.

#### EXPERIMENTING WITH POETRY IDEAS

In order to commune with feral parlance, the teacher must present a lesson that is clearly defined with straightforward guidelines, provide at least three examples of the type of poetry being studied, allow a significant amount of quiet writing time in which to create, and oh, grant the freedom to ignore the rules if whim dictates. The prompt should generate connections between the students' reality and the world around them. Music, art, literature, or content subject topics can serve as an impetus for poetry writing. Field trips, walks, and school or community events can be fertile grounds for collecting the seeds – words, images, and phrases – for student writing. None of these methods or practices is an itemized, systematic approach to writing poems. On the contrary, they are opportunities for chance encounters during just 45-minute periods with muses who begin to immigrate to the poetic park and sit at the pupil's elbow.

One poetry experience that helps students link metaphor with their lives is the "I am..." poem form. It is a wonderful place to start with just about any group of students no matter what their grade level, poetry experience, or language arts ability. Every student is able to create at least one clear metaphor – truthful or outrageous – that connects his or her life with the world of poetry. Amber had just this sort of success. It surprised us both.

Possessed with the desire to complete all her work, Amber rarely seemed to enjoy writing. As a

struggling, hard-working student, Amber put forth her determined energy into poetry. With just this sort of mindset, she tackled the “I am...” exercise. Once I shared a few examples of previous student work and explained that the more surprising the metaphor the better (if a metaphor sounds familiar, then tweak it enough to make it unique is the rule of thumb), I gave students time to create their own poems. They were allowed to simply make a list of “I am” statements complete with metaphors, or they could venture off where an “I am” start took them. (The “freedom to ignore the rules” applied here.) Amber began her thrill with poetry from this exercise and it continued throughout our time together.

### **I AM**

I am a cabinet,  
 keeping all my thoughts  
 and feelings  
 hid inside.  
 shutting out everyone  
 that tries to get too near.  
 Like soap and water  
 washing away dirt,  
 I try to push  
 the real me aside  
 I am a fish  
 without family  
 always lonely and wanting  
 to fit in.  
 Like a highway  
 with both smooth and bumpy spots.  
 I have a soft heart  
 yet rough edges.

Amber Angel (**Orb** 2001, 81)

My own metamorphosis has been a vital part of my students’ success with poetry – reading and writing. As I become more comfortable with its myriad of forms, multi-layered nuances, and unpredictable nature, my classroom turns into a haven where my students and I can explore language together. Students open up to more than one way of creating and interpreting poems. Their poetic reflections of the world around them help them find their own voices. They attempt to capture a specific moment in time or an elusive feeling or fractured images buried beneath reality.

I urge my students to take notice of typical days; days that seem to string along one after another without much diverging. They begin to see what would have otherwise been missed. Whether they

are simply looking out a window, walking down the street, or hanging out around town, they begin to experience their routine lives in a different way.

### **The Open Street**

as a sleek yellow cat walks down the open street,  
 it looks around in curiosity  
 wondering when or if it is going  
 to seek its destination.

Arron Hutchison (**Orb** 2001, 79)

### **Abandoned House**

an abandoned house  
 sitting on the corner  
 like a kid with no  
 friends.  
 torn up like a  
 foreign kid  
 starving,  
 no clothes or heat,  
 about to die  
 on the corner

Randy Blevins (**Still I Thirst**, 23)

### **Tree**

I am  
 breakable like glass.  
 My leaves lay  
 all around me  
 fallen and stepped on.  
 One day I will be  
 gone and leaving  
 a single seed to  
 start the generation  
 to come.

Amber Angel (**Orb** 2001, 78)

### **Autumn**

Autumn is like mercury, dangerous,  
 poisonous, but yet so precious.  
 The autumn leaves slip through the  
 waxy chimney like lava slips from a  
 blazing volcano.  
 They are pulled toward the fire with a  
 magnetic force and they burn like a cake  
 candle.  
 The fire dies down and the leaves are  
 washed away like a baby seal in a  
 tsunami.

Brittney Troutman (**Orb** 2001, 70)

Remarkably, students begin to write words that conjure up unusual or conflicting images. They surprise themselves; they surprise one another. Poetry is the great leveler of students. A student's spelling ability or language arts grade does not dictate his or her level of success with poetry. More

often than not, my most struggling students end up with the greatest feeling of accomplishment because they are more comfortable with the less confining structures of poetry than are those students who have become competent with proper sentence structure and compositional "do's and don't's".

### Myths

I slip through my shadow of  
Radio Darkness  
I dig at my panic TV flagpole  
I slam the brain of dark silence  
I catch a cry of a splintered bullet  
I cramp as the angel fish horse dies

Jeff Gibson (**Pines in the Night**, 10)

### In the House

near a blue flower vase  
stood a ghost with a cold  
ivory  
face moving slowly like a  
blind mouse  
never to find a single  
flower in the house.

Tim Thompson (**Orb** 2001, 84)

### (Untitled)

The darkness acts as if I were to be in a distilled  
sleep. With little demons jumping in fire as  
if they were playing a game  
as a normal child would, but yet I find myself  
in a desert.

As I awaken, the sun hits my eyes as if a police  
officer shined a flashlight on me. The sand  
felt like

I was being attacked by little people.

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Then I was starting to sink as the sand pulled  
my feet to its surface.

Reggie Bonner (**Orb** 2001, 81)

Riddle poems move students directly to figurative language and imagery. The students enjoy providing clues that make one think about the hidden identity of the poem. As they set up riddle poems,

students became keenly aware of the balance between solid clues and too much information. They often keep the title secret if it tells the answer until the very last guess has been made.

### Heavy Metal

As you hammer the sounds  
sounding like a roar from Hades  
you see your fingers move up and down the frets  
like four speeding bullets  
it makes an incredible option of notes –  
faster then slow again something is made.

Brandon Morgan (**Orb** 2001, 64)

### Gossip

An interesting book  
laying in the corner.  
A bored person  
with nothing to do.  
The person picks up  
the book.  
The adventure has begun.  
Once the book is done  
Another is started.

Amber Angel (**Orb** 2001, 80)

**Fishing**

Watching, watching  
 as the ripples bang against  
 the walls of the closed yet open  
 prison the sense of danger  
 that lurks not behind but all  
 around the black shadow  
 that covers the moving ceiling  
 the whisper of the line that  
 can be heard from the wall to  
 wall moves closer  
 the gasp for air comes  
 open as you're ripped into  
 another atmosphere the cool  
 becomes hot and the  
 hot becomes  
 pain until you struggle  
 No  
 More.

Willie Robinson (**Orb** 1998, 42)

**Catcher**

I begin to squat like a frog  
 stop and stay in that position  
 swing my arm as though I'm itching my head.  
 hold my hand out  
 as though I am telling someone to stop  
 then wait for a speeding train

Dylan Bourbonnais (**Orb** 2001, 73)

Most of the time, my students just delight in the sounds of words and the pictures made by them.

It is at these times that they truly proclaim loudly with their own voices.

**Noodles**

The off-white noodles  
 dance in the pot  
 of boiling bubbles  
 like worms wiggle out  
 of the ground on a rainy night.

Katie Morgan (**Orb** 2001, 72)

**(Untitled)**

Like a piece of glass that fell from  
 the glinting sun glittering like crystal  
 and a smooth as silk. Words that  
 extended and end in words of passion  
 of an unknown knowledge. Flat as a  
 board, stiff as a rock; no movement,  
 no sound except an unknown object  
 in a lake of grass.

Jasmine Floyd (**Orb** 2001, 66)

**Sign**

I see a sign  
 hanging  
 loosely from  
 a window  
 like a man  
 hanging from  
 a ledge on  
 the side  
 of a mountain  
 just  
 hanging – waiting  
 to be saved.

Valerie Shofner (**Orb** 1998, 44)

**Painting**

The colors of truth  
 appear as  
 the dark bristles are stroked  
 back and forth  
 the whispers of comfort begin  
 to override the need for words  
 the amazement returns as  
 success  
 the need for thought  
 grows weaker  
 the soul of colors begins  
 to take over

Willie Robinson (**The Glistening Medallion**, 14)

No matter what the exercise or lesson, students tend to find their own way with words. Their voices break through the mold and boldly proclaim a reality – or fantasy – that is uniquely their own and

yet touches a chord in the rest of us present. Here are some poems that speak from youth's depth - often without their knowing it - until after the last word is read aloud.

### **Without**

I first hear chitter-chatter in the background  
then some cries.  
I start to wonder what has happened.  
People, my family, start to hug me  
and say, "It's going to be okay."  
I get more engrossed in my thoughts.  
What has happened?  
When I hear it, my heart breaks  
like a hundred pounds of glass hitting the  
ground  
at the same time.  
My mother is no more.

Jim Zorns (**Orb** 1998, 43)

### **Imagination**

I am imagination. I'm growing colorless  
because of all the lack of me.  
I'm losing my color faster than I can gain it.  
These people you see here are forgetting me.  
Too much work and no play make me disappear.

Bobby Edens (**Orb** 2000, 66)

### **Alone**

It's quiet so quiet that you  
can hear the sound of ants marching.  
Your mind is relaxing as well as your thoughts  
looking into the sky for what  
I do not know.  
Looking for an answer to a question that can't  
be answered.  
But then again that answer is right before my  
eyes.  
People say only the blind can't see but they're  
wrong.

Ricky Campbell (**A Unicorn's Dream**, 3)

### **The Armature**

I am a part of a motor off of an old car.  
If I could only find the other part of me I would  
be useful.  
It feels like I could be put in a hole and never be  
seen again.  
If I was taken to a recycle building I could be  
worth a couple cents.

Justin Honaker (**Orb** 2000, 83)

### **Early Memories**

I remember the day  
the day my mom gave me away  
gave me away like dogs do their fleas  
it felt like my heart stopped  
everything became a blur  
I was for sure it was for a little while  
days turned into months, months into years  
I hated her for it  
now I am learning to get over it  
getting over it like I was getting over a cold  
I remember the day my mom gave me away.

James Myles (**Orb** 1998, 42)

### **Video Games**

Video games are like relationships.  
The next thing you know,  
It starts getting boring,  
And sometimes it gets violent.

Rebecca Howell (**Orb** 2001, 67)

Like wooing a wild creature to endure human touch, I nudge my students into poetry. Whatever the exercise, I always make a positive comment on every writing attempt whether it is a complete poem or just random lines. I affirm their trust with comments such as: "You really catch the emotion/scene/idea here," or "The rhythm in this part/line moves the poem along," or "Solid imagery/metaphor here," or "Neat personal touch/insight here," or simply "This is strong." After a few experiences, most students are ready for those comments that will push them beyond their present state. I make them stretch with: "Help us see/taste/hear/smell/touch more," or "How does \_\_\_\_ feel/know/think?" or "Could you use a different verb/noun/phrase here?"

Poetry has escaped my hanging baskets. It is now live honeysuckle run amok. It is meandering around the walls and across the floor. It has begun to entwine itself up desk legs, bookshelves, and file cabinets. With its delicate strength, it is rooting itself in our textbooks, novels, and class writings while its delicious fragrance intoxicates the air. I try not to prune it and make it behave. However, I still have a way to go before I am completely at ease with this wildness in my classroom. Last year it anchored itself in my own assortment of oddities (half a conch shell, piece of slate, spiral notebook wire, broken drill, etc.) that my students helped collect. Daily they would handle each sepa-

rate item and arrange the growing mound of old and seemingly useless items, adding their own touches to the classroom's flea market décor. I am just now adjusting to my new role as a naturalist, safari guide, and junk collector. Thank you, Terry!

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