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Essential Poetry: Activating the Imagination in the Elementary Classroom

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Author

Cronmiller, Sue

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The California Department of Education's Guiding Principles for Elementary Education state: "Children are active learners, drawing on direct physical and social experience as well as on culturally transmitted knowledge to construct their own understandings of the world around them." Although reading and writing poetry is not recommended directly by the authors of the California content standards, elementary students who study poetry in writing workshops demonstrate an active ability to employ language in the "construct(ion of) their own understandings of the world." In fact, if taught effectively in the early years, the study of poetry can help lay the groundwork for a lifetime of meaningful, intellectual inquiry. For, reading and writing poetry involves an active engagement with the imaginative, creative, and, therefore, inquisitive faculties of a child's own mind (insight). In turn, the development of personal insight assists the development of higher level thinking skills that can enable, more fully, the learning process in general.

In an essay published in 2003, "Poetry's Place and the Poet's Participation with Fields of Knowledge," Rosemary Winslow argues for poetry's essential locus in the learning and thinking process: "The writer (and reader of the poetic) actively participates in construction of a view of reality....if writing is seen as a *process* for discovering and developing thought, the processes writing poetry activates engage

both a fuller, more expansive discovery and development in which the individual actively learns something new." Despite poetry's power to engage the imagination and invigorate students' participation with the world through language, the study of poetry is often misunderstood or avoided, and consequently, underutilized as a dynamic tool to help young learners develop more active modes of thinking.

Evidence of active participation across knowledge and content domains can be seen in writing created by students in poetry workshops at El Sol Academy of Arts and Sciences-- the first dual language charter elementary school in the city of Santa Ana, California. Generally speaking, Santa Ana is the most populous city in Orange County and is the eighth most densely populated city in the US. It has the highest percentage of Latinos among the 50 largest cities in America (over 75%). The student population of El Sol is primarily Hispanic (with family origins in Central and South America as well as Mexico), but also culturally diverse; a percentage of the student body is African American and Anglo. 90% of the students receive free or reduced price lunches. For the past three years, as part of a grant funded research project, I've been developing and testing a whole school, computer assisted poetry curriculum at El Sol that begins when the students are in the third grade. In El Sol's Spanish –

English dual language immersion program, students are taught almost exclusively in Spanish until the fourth grade.

The poetry curriculum introduces English instruction to El Sol's third grade students by engaging their innate interest and ability in figurative, imaginative language. Modeled after university seminars in creative writing, poetry workshops at El Sol expose elementary students to poetic work of cultural and historical significance and carefully guide the inspiration, drafting, writing and revision of their own original poetry. University creative writing workshops employ constructivist teaching methods, in so far as the students are more actively involved than in a traditional classroom. The Iowa workshop model, popularized in the 1950s, consists of small groups of students, meeting with an instructor to discuss each other's work by offering suggestions on how to improve it. In constructivist classrooms, students are encouraged to talk to each other and the teacher. Constructivist teachers allow student responses to drive lessons, shift instructional strategies, and alter content (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). In scaffolding instruction, a more knowledgeable other provides scaffolds or supports to facilitate the learner's development. Vygotsky defined scaffolding instruction as the "role of teachers and others in supporting the learner's development and providing support structures to get to that next stage or level" (Raymond, 2000, p 176). In poetry

workshops, the instructor facilitates an open ended, collaborative discussion. The quality of the student work created in these workshops can be attributed to the power of the reading selections, the playfulness of the group activities, scaffolding of the writing process, and most certainly, the quality of the discussion that takes place between the student writers and the poetry instructor.

Fundamentals of Writing: The Image

Imagination= Image + in + ation (in process or action)

Even without an explicit reference to poetry writing, California's language arts standards for third grade offer the strategic teacher of poetry some legitimacy. Consider the following third grade writing standard for Language Arts:

Writing Applications (Genres and Their Characteristics)

2.2 Write descriptions that use concrete sensory details to present and support unified impressions of people, places, things, or experiences.

Indirectly, this content standard articulates an operative, albeit broad, definition of poetry.

When introducing poetry to children, it's good to begin the first lesson with a definition of the image, an exploration of its power and a discussion based on the relationship between concrete and abstract

language. An image in writing employs concrete language to construct pictures of the physical world conveyed through sensory information—sight, sound, touch, smell, taste. To differentiate between the world of concrete images and the world of ideas and words (abstractions), the children first explore the properties of the type of word known to them as a noun.

Together we explore the fact that a noun can be a person, place, thing or IDEA. Ideas are things we can't know through our senses, only by definition or relationship with sensory "real" things. Nouns representing emotions, for instance, words like love, fear, happiness, sadness are ideas and have no shape or form until we attach images--faces, sounds, touch, and scent--to that idea (impression).

To model and encourage original, individual insight and response, the first exercise is a playful one. We begin by making a list of "thing" nouns on the far left of the chalkboard or dry erase. We try to find unusual, very specific (detailed) nouns. For example, if a child recommends we list "dog," he or she is asked to be more exact by saying what kind of dog—breed, size, etc. Once we have a good set of five or six things, we start a new list to the left of the first. This list is for adjectives. We make the list separate from and in-no-relation-to the first list, though some intuition may inform the choice of words. Here again, the children are asked to be specific and to think of

unusual "delicious" words… words they like to say and hear—
mysterious, sensational, wicked.

The Simile: Randomness and Meaning

When we have five or six good adjectives, we move left again
and choose an idea noun—one of the emotions. A very good word to
use here is "love," one of the most co-opted, conventionalized words in
our language, for "love" is often described in sentimental clichés and
symbols (hearts and flowers). So, we list "love" five or six times, then
add the articles and verbs to make one-sentence simple similes. The
results of this exercise may look something like this:

IDEA NOUN	ADJECTIVE		THING NOUN
Love (is as)	mysterious	(as a)	moth
Love (is as)	wicked	(as a)	rhinoceros
Love (is as)	perplexing	(as a)	wishbone
Love (is as)	electrical	(as a)	Chihuahua
Love (is as)	magnificent	(as a)	sandcastle

We discuss the simile and its properties of comparison using the
words "like" or "as." Then we discuss the merit of each of these
statements. Is love mysterious? How? Can a moth be mysterious? How
so? What do we know about a moth that is similar to what we know
about love? Does the simile "feel" true? That is, does it have a sense

of truth without being literally true? Is love as magnificent as a sandcastle? What do love and sandcastles have in common? What is your favorite of these similes? Which one is the least true or interesting?

The instructor of this exercise must be willing to trust the *process*-- to be inspired by the words the children contribute. Teaching poetry is itself a poetic process in which logic and connection often come about through unexpected means. When we introduce this lesson, it's often in the fall, when the community is preparing for Halloween. One such session produced the simile: "Love is as mysterious as bones." The simile inspired a conversation about love's agency in the creation of life and also its power in transcending death. When we concluded our discussion, one student looked at me in astonishment and said: "Wow. I didn't know poetry could do that!"

Once the students have seen how the simile exercise works, they are happy to work independently to create their own lists of favorite things and adjectives and then match them up in original, one sentence similes. Here are some examples from a typical first lesson:

Love is as scary as a history project.   Melissa

Love is as rapid as magma.   Emilio

Love is as small as Pluto.   Christina

Sadness is as circular as an egg.   Jennifer

These examples clearly demonstrate the writer's inspired interplay with the larger world. By activating the child's insight and observational skills, the exercise enables the application of knowledge gained in other subject areas, permitting the child to synthesize and verbalize, on his or her own terms, the mastery of interesting facts and concepts. In the same small sentence, each child expresses, subtly, an awareness of internal truths and issues. In the writing lessons that follow, students review the definition of a simile and are encouraged to enhance all of their descriptions with fresh, imaginative similes using concrete, sensory details.

Grade Appropriate Texts

When I first proposed a poetry curriculum for the third grade featuring readings by renowned adult poets such as Federico Garcia Lorca, Pablo Neruda, and Wallace Stevens, several colleagues in education were skeptical. Their objection? These works are reserved for Advanced Placement English courses at the high school level. Even AP students struggle when reading and analyzing texts of this caliber. How, then, could an elementary student grasp even the most rudimentary understanding of these works?

In the third grade classroom, our goals for students do not include a mastery of literary analysis or a command of poetic terminology. Instead, the curriculum exposes young students to the

beauty and complexity of artistic, adult language. Lessons acknowledge the child's ability to appreciate, discuss and grapple with complex human questions. Writing activities invite the child to participate in the world of writing as a contributor, a maker of art, not as a consumer of published goods. By holding up as models the world's great poetry, instructors respect the child's intelligence and sensibility (wisdom). The practice empowers the child's intuition and insight. As a result, time after time, the child takes greater pains to express him or herself by using advanced vocabulary to explore and reconcile complicated individual, scientific and philosophical conflicts and processes.

Active listening—Making Connections

The first poem we bring to the third grade classroom is a beautifully crafted, rather lengthy surrealist ballad by the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca, "Romance Somnambulo" or "Sleepwalker's Ballad." After a brief introduction about the poet's life, country and history that includes finding Spain on the map of the world, and a discussion of the violent context of the Spanish Revolution, we read the poem aloud in its entirety. Because our students receive instruction in both Spanish and English, and nearly exclusively in Spanish until the fourth grade, we read the poem in both languages. Before each reading, students are instructed simply to collect words or

phrases that they find interesting by writing them down. While we are reading, students listen carefully, with pencil in hand. This is probably the first time the child has been asked to take notes in class—to discern importance or value from what is being said. We de-emphasize the importance of spelling correctly. Often, there are several students who do not know what to do the first time, but, for the most part, the class is busily writing throughout the reading.

Listening to Lorca's poem engages the students' imagination through its rich, sensory images, archetypal themes and symbols, such as horses, swords, the moon, sons and daughters. When the students have collected a working list of words and phrases to mine for ideas, we direct them towards writing their own original poem based on a review of the previous lesson in similes, the senses and images. We discuss the poem's colors. What colors do the students remember from the reading? What does the color green sound like? Taste like? Feel like? Here are some of the poems produced by third grade students in this exercise:

Warm Red   by Andrea S., third grade

red sounds like a crunchy apple in Yesenia's mouth.

red looks like my family in Mexico eating white corn.

red tastes like the playground sand under my feet.

red feels like a fragile rose in my garden.

red smells like corn boiling in a silver pot.

Green is the Wind of the Sea   by Andrea H., third grade

Green is the wind of the sea.

Let the wind rise into the stars and

Make a flash into the seas.

Their love is the trees.

Branches   by Sarah M., 3rd grade

A fish made of shade sleeps in the black house.

Silver branches smell like wind.

The clear house of wind wants love in his heart.

A fig tree rubs the wind with those green branches.

My Grandma   by Ricardo, 3rd grade

Love is as dark as a dragonfly.

Love looks like my grandma

chasing chickens on her farm in Mexico.

I can see her in a long, red dress

running around the farm.

Shiny sun, blue sky, green grass

white horses, brown cows, yellow chickens

white sheep, orange ducks --

all around my grandma,

her shiny hair in the wind.

I remember her brown eyes, her wrinkled face.

I remember her dry, kind, hard working hands.

honey   by Karina, 3rd grade

Honey is as wet as pink roses in a dark garden.

A dark garden is like a green grassy hill.

A green grassy hill is like a crispy salad.

A crispy salad is a like piñata in your mouth.

Your mouth is like a pink balloon.

A pink balloon is like missing my dad.

My bed is like a white moon.

The white moon is like a wish in the sky.

A wish is like a present just for me.

I am like bells, honey and a green, grassy hill--

a green grassy hill where my dad thinks of me.

Students who are most comfortable writing in Spanish may do
so, as long as they translate their finished poem into English before
submitting for publication. This exercise encourages the students'

ability to work in both languages. We then publish the poem in both Spanish and English.

After Lorca   by Diego M., 4th grade

El caballo verde con 300 rosas moradas

en su espalda corriendo en las montanas

retumblando entre la Guerra.

The green horse has 300 purple roses

on his back running in the mountains

thundering into war.

In their listening lists, each student collected similar words and responded to the same prompt, yet each student fulfilled the assignment in unique and interesting ways. Andrea S's poem adhered to the structural suggestions of the lesson, to create a simile for each of the five senses, while incorporating rich, detailed images and impressions of her family from memory. Andrea H's lines describe a perceived (and closely accurate) interconnectedness between the stars, the wind and the sea. Sarah's strange, beautiful images describe the loneliness of the wind, while Ricardo uses colors to create an expanded revision of one of the similes he wrote the previous week: "Love is as dark as a dragonfly." Karina's poem creates rhythm and

music by repeating and linking the comparisons made in each line. The final comparison in "honey" reveals, subtly and stunningly, the child's longing for her absent father. Diego's surrealist poem, "After Lorca," demonstrates his artistry in both languages. Each poem (unified impression) reveals the child's active, imaginative and vital engagement with a complex, intellectual world.

Word Banks--Vocabulary Building

The listening exercise introduced in the Lorca lesson can be repeated featuring any rich, imagistic poem. Pablo Neruda's "Forget Me" and "Soliloquy in the Waves," from *On the Blue Shore of Silence,* work particularly well here. The curriculum asks the students to keep a list of interesting words whenever the instructor is reading a poem. These lists are called "word banks." The following poems were written after listening to several poems by Pablo Neruda. The reading inspired a brief, but lively, discussion about the idea of "change" (a theme the third grade was studying in science class). For the writing exercise, students were asked to use words from their word banks to create a poem about the influence of change.

Change   by Rachel K., 3rd grade

Change is like the sea suffering for freedom.

The star light shows through

the frosted windows of the factories.

The thunder makes the waves reach the sky.

The planets vibrate as I suffer for freedom.

Freedom is a place where the river is calm,

where I can hear the sound of the waves.

Some place where I can reach the stars.

Alone.

Changes   by Karina T. 3rd grade

Change is like a fish swimming across the mountains.

Change is like the sun falling into the ocean.

Change sounds like my clock chiming loudly.

Change is like raindrops hitting an umbrella like tiny rocks.

Change feels like holding a little yellow star in my hand.

Simple, open prompts such as "A poem is like…" or "Having a friend is like…" allow students to select and combine words from their word banks in fresh and sophisticated compositions:

A Poem Is …   by Elizabeth A., 3rd grade

A poem is like blood inside a shell.

A poem is like observing a frog

drinking water from the blue pond.

A poem is like asking a

group of birds a question.

A Friend   by Emilio R., 3rd grade

Having a friend is like trying to catch a squirrel in a garden with

no light.

Having a friend is like trying to find visible obstacles.

Having a friend is like trying to find a lost picture of a pigeon

somewhere in a river.

Having a friend is like trying to stop several leaking pipes.

Reference Materials

If the student doesn't know the precise meaning of the words

they've selected, he or she is encouraged to use the dictionary—hard

copy or online. This method for learning new vocabulary encourages

the child's interest and active participation. When a student admires

the sound of a word and wants to be able to use it properly, he or she

is acting as a result of intrinsic motivation. Students are apt to be

more invested in the learning process than when completing the more

extrinsically motivated, compulsory vocabulary assignments and

worksheets.   Before Alan wrote his poem, "For My Mother," the words

"diminishing," "individual" and "phoenix" were in his word bank. The

word "diminish" inspired him to write this poem:

For My Mother   by Alan C., 3rd grade

The boat that leaves Mexico

leaves faces

diminishing

on the shore

far, far

individual

like the phoenix that dies

to live again.

The word "phoenix" sent Alan to his computer to do an Internet search on the mythical creature. The resulting one sentence poem incorporates each of the advanced vocabulary words on his list.

Developing a Body of Work

All student work created in the poetry workshops is collected and kept in the student's folder until it is entered into the project's online website for revision and publication (the Writing LAB http://www.uclinks.org/PA). As written work does not go home with the student, they are able to revisit work they wrote in previous sessions, even in previous years, to revise and rewrite. Students in fourth and fifth grade often go back into their folders to look for ideas or language that will inspire new work.

When Alberto was revising his poem, "Rain Shadow," toward the end of fourth grade, he had only a few indecipherable phrases left over from the original created in the third grade. These phrases contained the words "maracas," "world," "shadow," "mystery" and "well." His poem was about rain. He felt a strong inclination to work on it and was typing it into the website when I sat down to see what he was working on. He was deeply intent on expressing the connections he sensed between the words and what he wanted to say. Together, we discussed the precise sounds the rain makes and tried to approximate them in words. The shadow idea was completely his— we needed only to discuss how to describe the owner of the shadow in a way that pleased him. We also discussed the process through which rain water ends up in a well. After our discussion, I left his side to work with another student. This is what Alberto came up with as a result of our conversation:

Rain shadow   by Alberto R., 4th grade

When it rains it sounds like maracas going chik-a-chik-a-chik.

The sound makes the world feel like being

inside a shadow separating from his object.

Rain water coming down from nowhere

goes into the dirty, slimy streets,

through the layers of earth and rocks

coming clean in the mystery of the well.

Like Alberto's poem, the following poem by Joshua is a revised version of writing that began when he was in the third grade. The poem was inspired by Pablo Neruda during the previously described exercise based on the idea of change.

moon rise   by Joshua G., 4th grade

Change is like a street made of stones.

Isn't the moon made out of stones?

The moon changes its love for the waves each day.

The moon pushes the waves to keep them alive.

One day the moon will push the waves hard enough

so they rise to the sky and keep the moon company.

Both poems demonstrate transference of knowledge regarding the physical sciences, though neither the prompt nor the exercise contains any mention of science or scientific properties. The question in the second line of "moon rise" simultaneously reveals the mind in the act of thinking, while actively turning the poem's attention from the street below to the sky above. The conclusion of the poem represents a harmony between interplanetary and natural forces. It

appears that the children use the poetry workshop to articulate relationships and processes they are trying to grasp in the classroom or perhaps are struggling to understand on their own. The poems, in general, have a sense of completion, of closure and of authority which leads one to conclude that children at this age seek resolution and conclusion, even if, as in Rachel's poem, "Change," that conclusion reveals a difficult and lonely truth.

The poetry project at El Sol Academy of Arts and Sciences has had the luxury of three years of continued funding from UC Links (University-Community Links at the University of California, Berkeley) and institutional continuity at the school. As a result, students at El Sol who are now entering the sixth grade have participated in three full years of poetry workshops. Last year, 25 fifth graders attended a voluntary after school program to continue developing their body of work. Their folders contain poetry they wrote as third graders, which they are now revising by employing a more skillful hand, as well as new poems that integrate greater literary knowledge. Students in the more advanced grades apply literary analysis skills to their own poetry, identifying the metaphors, analogies, and similes they created in earlier years.

Each student is given a log-in and password to the online Writing LAB so that they may access the site at any time. The website is set

up so that the poems published in the project's online literary journal *Mind's Eye* (http://www.uclinks.org/PA) are available for view throughout the student's educational career and beyond…when he or she is grown and has children of his or her own.

Conclusion: Consumerism vs. Active Participation

A search for "poetry" in the California English-language Arts Content Standards reveals the word's first appearance in grade seven:

Vocabulary and Concept Development

1.1 Identify idioms, analogies, metaphors, and similes in prose and poetry.

When students are asked to "identify" the figurative and artistic aspects of poetry, their participation with the art of language is removed to the act of consumerism at the expense of active participation. Moreover, waiting to examine the art of language until the seventh grade neglects the child's demonstrated ability to form an active, original and inquisitive relationship with the world through imaginative language at an earlier age. The goal of language arts development should not be restricted to the realm of outside observation, analyzing, as a consumer, the world's great literature. Rather, the task is to educate the imagination. On this subject, in a panel discussion with child psychologist and writer Robert Coles, Luis Hyde remarks: "In terms of educating the imagination…everybody is

born with an imagination, and that it's only a matter of trying not to damage it and of trying to provide situations in which it can grow. And that begins with just being attentive to the child that's in front of you, which takes time and energy and silence and money."

The work of this project and these young writers stands as an exemplary model for integrating effective poetry education into the elementary curriculum. If more students are taught to understand and appreciate the art of language first hand, eventually there will be more teachers who will feel comfortable teaching poetry and more school administrators and policy makers who will promote and support poetry programs such as the one described here.

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