

Workshop 3: Teaching Poetry

Jack Wilde's Reflections

What is poetry?

The reason that I like having my kids do poetry is because they have a pretty narrow definition coming into middle school of what poetry is. And I don't think they have a very good concept of what is possible in poetry. So very often they think of poetry simply as rhyming and entertaining, and that certainly is one band. But again, I feel a part of my responsibility as a teacher is to expand their sense of what's possible in poetry, not only in terms of what they read but then in terms of what they can produce.

So the reason I chose to share this poem with them today and use this poem as a model for their own writing is because the poet, McKeel McBride, really shows students another way in which poetry opens a door for writing. And specifically, what she does in her poem, "Why I Love Mashed Potatoes" [sic] is to give several different takes on the same topic. So she's going to talk about the mashed potatoes and gives different instances where she has enjoyed or experiences she has enjoyed with these mashed potatoes.

So one of the chances that exists in poetry that doesn't exist really in prose, or in much of prose, is to do alternate takes on the same topic. It's a power that poetry possesses. It's a way in which we can use it. So I love giving the kids this example, talking about it a little bit, and then having them start to think about something and doing multiple takes on the same experience, on the same object, and they can start to see poetry lends itself in ways to doing that that prose doesn't.

Teaching students how genres work

I guess there are a lot of ways in which it is similar to the teaching of other kinds of writing that in all instances what I'm trying to help my students do is realize that they're empowered to figure out how a genre works. And so, if I can provide them plenty of experiences, hopefully, good experiences, then they can start to figure out for themselves, oh, this is how poetry works, that they come in with a very limited sense of what its possibilities are, what the tools are that one can use, and that I can broaden their sense of that. I think in some ways it probably takes more time to do that because they feel that they do know poetry in some ways, but what they know is just this very narrow band of

rhyming poems that tend to not leave spaces for their imagination. And so we've got to sort of unlearn that or learn that that's just a very small segment of it.

Writing poetry in layers

The longer I teach poetry, the more I do this, is to have my kids write in layers. And by a layer, what I mean is that they write a draft, then they can't go back and look at that draft and look at that draft when they write a second draft. So they write a second draft not having been able to look at the first draft, and then they write a third draft where they can't look at the first two drafts. And the reason for doing that, and they recognize this, instead of going back and looking at them, is that those first drafts are very often prose. And that by giving them this space and demanding of them that they can't go back and look at what they've done they start to get to the more compressed, concise language. So that by the fourth or fifth draft we're approaching poetry. I could never get them to do—I wouldn't want to ask them to write five drafts of a prose piece.