

Workshop 3: Teaching Poetry

Vivian Johnson's Reflections

Immersing students in poetry

The first thing my students ever hear me say is a poem. The last thing they ever hear me say is a poem. Before I even tell them my name, or what class it is, or why we're there, and it is a continual important part of what we do together before we start every class period. And those poems aren't dissected or analyzed or reflected on. They're just enjoyed. So for a long time, weeks and weeks before we try to write poetry, I begin to, as Tom Romano says, marinate them in poems.

And I would hope that my classroom is a literate environment and that's part of making it that. There are a number of poetry books accessible and it's like putting a basket of fruit by the telephone when you have teenagers at home. You know, I just inconspicuously put poetry in baskets and it's close. Or I will feed it to specific students when they look the triflest bored, just to come up and pass them a book of poetry with no comment, or I will include poetry in a number of novels of realistic fiction, or I will line the chalk trays with poems. I'll put them on the walls in the hall. A week before we start writing poetry there must be 50 quotations about the genre of poetry that lines the halls of our school. Any way I can raise the consciousness of the place it could have in one's life, I try to do that.

Teaching students to write poetry

So I guess the marination is critical and then time to read it—there can be no writing of poetry until one reads it, and reads a great deal of it, and develops opinions about what resonates for them as a reader, so we do that. And in and around that, then we start trying to make the process of writing poetry non-threatening.

The first three or four days of writing poetry are things that anyone can do immediately and feel successful—found poetry, acrostics, list poems, narrative poems—things that just come automatically as readers, and they begin to see, you know, I can do this. Because a number of teenagers have decided they probably don't want to write poems or they wouldn't be good at it if they tried, at least a fair number of them. And then we start after that, what for some of my students is a review and for some it's very new, I teach mini-lessons about

figurative language. And every time I'm teaching I'm expecting to see that in a draft that day in the workshop. So if we have showcased the figurative language simile, then I'm expecting to see that, that day, in the workshop. And when I'm walking around during the workshop I'm looking for simile. And sometimes they keep a highlighter on their desk and sometimes I ask them to highlight it or post-it and then I go find it or I'll come by and they'll show it to me.

After that I do a number of poetic devices with them the same way. I'm teaching, I'm modeling, and there's a great deal of examples along with the instruction, but then I have that expectation of seeing it in their work.

All this time and in tandem with this juxtaposed is a compilation of poems that they have found that, as we say, resonate for them. They collect an anthology of poetry from the ones that they've read in class and outside and also poems that they have written in this time of writing poetry, where they have about 50 poems. And the poems are not just things they have copied and put in a binder but poems they've liked well enough to respond to in some way.

So there are as many different ways to respond to a poem as there are eighth-graders, and it really doesn't matter to me whether they write off line, whether they sketch, whether they try to emulate the style of the poet, whether they simply tell what they liked about it, or whether they pull out the poetic devices and identify them. It doesn't matter. But the fact that they have involved, engaged the text moves forward their own thinking, so that I can see a transmission of that into their own writing. But I don't know how it would be without those imperative steps of first reading it, hearing it read, collecting it. And then when the actual solid instruction starts, expecting to see that in their writing.

Passion for teaching poetry

I don't think any one of us can teach anything without it being a clear passion, and poetry is such an ongoing beautification of my own life that I share that with them. I tell them what my niece says, who is a poet, and hers is one of the quotations they copy when she says, "The poetry is in my life, I just write it down." So all of those things I think link, come together, converge, and the kids have been unaware of it until we actually begin the poetry unit, which I never keep until the end of the year but couch somewhere in the middle of the year when I think it's a good time for them depending on the class, and their own needs, and where we are with other kinds of writing.

Holding "poetry reads"

We have what I call "poetry reads," and I simply distribute 75, 80 poetry books. I give them a few minutes, and we have time to find poems they like, and then they share those with a neighbor, and then they share the ones that the two or three of them have chosen together to the whole class.

And some of them are read—many of them are read—silently, and that's as far as it goes. And then others are shared with the one friend, others to a small group, others to the whole group. So they have opportunities to start to see the different kinds of poems that may have meaning for them and to find favorite poets.

Experiencing poetry

I first want to give them another opportunity to record their lives and to make sense of it, to celebrate events, but to also celebrate all kinds of emotion and events. So for me it's—for my students, it's a way of journaling.

But, in addition to that, and in tandem, almost juxtaposed onto that, it's another way of teaching literary elements. And the compression of the language, the compactness of poetry, it's almost, for me, like picture books in that we can look into poetry to see things well done, whether it's word choice or fluency or whatever. But certainly a way to record and make sense of what's going on in their lives, but to lose their sense of isolation, to let someone else say for them what they have felt but did not have words to say, a sort of universal connection, and then just for the sheer joy of it.

Sharing your poetry

I often share my poetry with them, many times not in final form, because I find that that's more intimidating than it is challenging sometimes, motivating, but I do share it with them. Many times I use that in lessons about revision where we can look at it and I can identify some lack of resolution in a certain point or something that I'd like help on, and I find that more effective and a great deal safer than using student papers of that group.