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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2013 Volume II: Interpreting Texts, Making Meaning: Starting Small

Teaching Tone, Mood and Purpose through the Interpretation of Activist Poetry

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by Wm. Miles Greene

Students in urban high schools often feel uninspired and powerless over their own future but often excel or take interest in traditional forms of self-expression like song or poetry. Poetry is a special form of expression in that it allows one to express ideas and experiences through rhythmic language in an artistic fashion, often relying on the experiences of the reader for its interpretation. Specifically, Activist Poetry brings attention to social or political injustices and aims to encourage action against these social or political injustices through traditional activist methods. However, before awareness and action can occur, a strong understanding of a poem's intention must be established. Understanding the author's intention is a vital step in the interpretation of a poem and is most effectively ascertained through the identification and consideration of a poem's tone. In this unit students will learn how to interpret the intention of a poem by examining the tone, mood and purpose of socially and politically conscious poetry. Consequently, students will improve their comprehension, literacy and skills in self-expression by analyzing the relationship between a poem, its author, subject and own personal experiences. Students will ultimately create poetry of their own, using techniques taught surrounding tone, mood and purpose, that aims to bring light to a significant social problem faced by that student's community.

(Developed for English, grade 9; recommended for English, grades 8-9)

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