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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2005 Volume I: The Uses of Poetry in the Classroom

Thematic Poetry Reading and Writing Workshop

Curriculum Unit 05.01.02, published September 2005
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Purpose

The intent of this unit is to incorporate a thematic poetry reading and writing workshop into my current Language Arts curriculum. Students will participate in weekly poetry reading and writing workshops with the end product being portfolios, published works, and an opportunity to perform before a group of peers. Each week students will read poetry with a general theme. We will attempt to interpret the authors' intent, hoping to identify the obvious meanings while exploring the tacit messages. They will then write poems with a similar message and use the writing process to fine tune what they have written. Ultimately, they will select their "best" poems, memorize them, and perform them during a school assembly in the month of February (Black History month).

Learner and Academic Setting

Learner

Over 90% of the students I teach are African American and many live with extended family members, in single parent homes, or in foster care. The reasons vary but generally include drug abuse, incarceration, or just indifference. A large number of students are living in conditions where financial resources are very limited and crime is rampant. School is an escape for obvious reasons: they will be served lunch, there is structure, and they have an opportunity to interact with peers who live parallel lives. The intent of this unit is to give these students another reason to want to come to school; to learn to freely express themselves while learning key educational objectives. The optimum results will be to create life long readers of poetry who can use critical analysis to understand what they have read.

Academic Setting

The school is located in an area of Houston that shows definite signs of how urban flight changes a neighborhood. It sits on the edge of downtown and within a few miles of the city's much adored Reliant and AstroDome stadiums, upscale apartment complexes, and chic shopping venues. Once a robust area with

middle class residences, the neighborhood now has many of the attributes found in any city ghetto. Its fate can be attributed to the oil bust of the 1980's when much of Houston's economy relied on the oil industry. Before this time, many of the people of Houston were working for large companies like Cameron Iron, FMC, and Hughes Tools, making enough money to buy and maintain homes and live comfortable lives. As a result of the oil bust and the resulting loss of the employment base, many of the neighborhood's residents lost their jobs and in many case their homes. Thus began the downward spiral which is evident today. Broken cars line the streets, and stray dogs run freely in packs. People with obvious addictions roam the area asking for money, and there are those who encourage their addictive habits.

The school, which was previously a middle school campus with grades 6 - 8th is now a kindergarten - 8th grade campus. The change occurred when a local elementary school's attendance dropped and the school board decided that it was not feasible to keep it open. Therefore, elementary students were transferred to the middle school to cut cost.

I have taught 6th grade Language Arts at the school for the past three years, and I am always fascinated by the energy that students exude when we begin a unit on poetry. A typical lesson plan on poetry includes students reading and writing limericks and acrostics because the state adopted English text book has a chapter on these poetic styles. I usually modify the lesson to include free verse poetry writing. I am fascinated by how expressive students can be. Many of them write about a family member, the neighborhood, their fears, or their hopes for the future. They enjoy unstructured poetry writing. This allows them to express themselves using the vernacular common to some African American people usually referred to as "Ebonics" or "Black English." While I do have students who like writing poetry using a predictable formula, like the one found in limericks, they too tend to have the same themes and use the same vernacular. It seems that for both groups writing poetry is therapeutic.

I have mixed feelings about the use of Ebonics in writing, and I've asked myself many times, What qualifies dialect as language? According to Theresa Perry and Lisa Delpit in *The Real Ebonics Debate Power, Language, and the Education of African-American Children*:

There used to be a method where you would look at how many words are shared between two languages. If it was 80 percent or more, you'd say they were dialects of the same language rather than different languages. By those criteria...African American vernacular English or Ebonics is more accurately described as a dialect than a totally separate language. But... it is the most distinctive dialect in the United States and the one that has gotten the attention of linguistics. (Perry, 59)

Therefore, for this unit, I will side with the Oakland school board which decided that "Ebonics/African-American Language should be used as a bridge to teaching Standard English." (Perry, 71)

Unit Objectives

This unit will provide students with additional opportunities to express themselves through poetry. They will read poetry with various themes, they will write poems using these themes as a guide, they will create portfolios to store their work, and they will share their work. Additionally, this unit will also introduce students

to canonical poets and different poetic styles.

Cross Curricular Activities

I also intend students to engage in cross curricular activities like social studies by learning about the lives of the poets whose poetry we will read and analyze. Additionally, they will learn about the events that influenced their writing. In class, students will learn simple biographical information about poets like place and date of birth, where they lived during the course of their lives, where they went to school, and where or if they received a college education. To differentiate the unit for students who perform above grade level (e.g. gifted and talented students), I will include project work that will require a more in depth study of the poets and the events that influenced their writings. These projects will be presented to the class. Students who are part of the school's inclusion program will be asked to create bio-boards (poster boards with biographical information) that contain pictures of a single poet and poems written by that poet.

Poetry Reading and Writing

I will begin the unit by reading poetry that expresses common themes: the pains of youth, the problems with family, and troubles in society. I will use poems that express these themes to model poetry writing activities that students will engage in during the first poetry writing workshops. This will set the tone for the rest of the weekly workshops.

Others themes that I plan to use during weekly poetry writing workshop are: Empathy, Human Values, Citizenship, Friendship, and Resolving Conflicts.

The first goal of my unit is to expose students to poetry that deals with the issues of youth, family and society. The four poems selected to serve this purpose are: "John, Who is Poor" by Gwendolyn Brooks, "Children's Rhymes" by Langston Hughes, "Dark People" by Kattie M. Cumbo, and "You Know, Joe" by Ray Durem. These poems will be used as models to introduce students to the poetry writing workshop. We will have a whole class discussion about the poets' intent and the poets' style. I will give students books that contain biographical information about each poet. They will be asked to find the poets' place and date of birth, where they lived during the course of their life, where they went to school, and where or if they received a college education. I will provide students with the details and instructions for the workshop and state the ultimate goal, which is to publish and perform their best works during a school assembly. As a group, we will write a poem.

The next goal will be for students to create a process portfolio to maintain their work. The portfolio will be used to assess and evaluate student works. At the end of the unit, students will select their best works and prepare them for publishing. They will be asked to add art work that corresponds to each theme.

Portfolios

During each weekly poetry reading and writing session, students will listen to and/or read poetry written by a particular author. We will then examine what the author's intended message is by extracting the obvious but suggesting the tacit. There will be three divisions in the portfolios:

- Author study – students will document basic information about the poet like name, date of birth, place of birth, education, and where and why they began writing poetry.
- Themes – students will document the general themes discussed while reading poetry during class and

create graphic organizers to list characteristics of the themes.

- My Poetry – students will use information from the "Themes" section to create their own works.

Presentation

Finally, during the month of February, the school always has a program to celebrate Black History month. My final goal is to use the program as an opportunity to present students' work to an audience. As I did with some of the classics read during my senior high school years, I will require students to memorize their poems.

What is Poetry?

I tend to agree with the Greeks on the definition of poetry if it is true that "the Greeks assumed...that poetry is an art: that it expresses emotion through words rhythmically arranged." (Bliss Perry, 8) Additionally, I believe that for students to fully appreciate poetry as a form of artistic expression, they must be both readers and writers of poetry. In the article "Poetry Top 10: A Foolproof Formula for Teaching Poetry," Mara Linaberger says, "when teachers choose to only read poems with students...students become confused by the complexity of poetry, which often makes them reluctant to try writing their own poems." (Linaberger)

For this reason, I will include three central focuses in my weekly lessons: 1. Students will read or listen to poetry. 2. Students will respond to what they have read or heard. 3. Students will write their own poems.

Free Verse Poetry

I want to introduce students to free-verse poetry because:

In the free-verse poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, accent is looser and embodies the provisional, moment by – moment quality of daily living and speaking. Free verse is less arch and dramatic than meter; it is more conversational and open-ended. (Wormser, 1)

Because of the way students speak (slang is predominant), I think introducing them to the poet and poetry using this style may spark their interest and inspire them to write.

Grammar and Usage

Early in the school year, my students have difficulties writing simple and complex sentences. Before beginning the unit on poetry, I must make sure that everyone can effortlessly write and identify simple and complex sentences. Additionally, we will review types of sentences and parts of speech. I can then explain how poetry writing may deviate from some of the grammar and usage rules that generally apply. With that accomplished,

I will paraphrase the following quote when I explain how poetry is written:

Poets are perfectly willing... to flout prescribed usages if it is necessary to the artistic success of the poem. If a poet is being ungrammatical or ignoring standard punctuation or is not using capital letters where capital letters seem to be called for, it is safe to say that the poet has a good reason for doing what she or he is doing. Notions of correct usage emphasize comprehension and poems want to be comprehended but that comprehension must occur on the poems' own terms. (Wormser, 79)

I will provide students with examples of poems to show them how to write in this way and explain why some of the grammar and/or usage rules have been ignored.

Poets' Biography

It is important for students to identify with the poets whose works they will be reading. For this reason, I will provide them with the following biographical information because the majority of the works we will read will be by these poets:

Gwendolyn Brooks (deceased)

Date of birth: June 7, 1917

Place of birth: Topeka, Kansas

Achievements: In 1950 Gwendolyn Brooks became the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. "Eventide" was her first published poem. It was published in *American Childhood Magazine* when she was thirteen.

Rita Dove

Date of birth: August 28, 1952

Place of birth: Akron, Ohio

Achievements: Rita Dove won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1986. She was the first woman and first African American to be appointed poet laureate of the United States in 1993. She was the first person to be appointed poet laureate for two terms.

Langston Hughes (deceased)

Date of birth: February 1, 1902

Place of birth: Joplin, Missouri

Achievements: Langston Hughes' first published poem was "The Negro Speaks of the Rivers." He wrote sixteen books of poems, two novels, three collections of short stories, four volumes of "editorial" and "documentary"

fiction, twenty plays, children's poetry, musicals and operas, three autobiographies, a dozen radio and television scripts and dozens of magazine articles. In addition, he edited seven anthologies. The long and distinguished list of Hughes' works includes: *Not Without Laughter* (1930); *The Big Sea* (1940); *I Wonder As I Wander* (1956), his autobiographies. His collections of poetry include: *The Weary Blues* (1926); *The Negro Mother and other Dramatic Recitations* (1931); *The Dream Keeper* (1932); *Shakespeare In Harlem* (1942); *Fields of Wonder* (1947); *One Way Ticket* (1947); *The First Book of Jazz* (1955); *Tambourines To Glory* (1958); and *Selected Poems* (1959); *The Best of Simple* (1961). He edited several anthologies in an attempt to popularize black authors and their works. Some of these are: *An African Treasury* (1960); *Poems from Black Africa* (1963); *New Negro Poets: USA* (1964) and *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* (1967). (Jackson, June 11)

Ray Durem (deceased)

Date of birth: 1915

Place of birth: Seattle, Washington

Achievements: He was a veteran of the Spanish Civil War and made his home in Mexico.

Note: Very little is written about him as a poet; therefore, he would be a great subject for a research project.

Lucille Clifton

Date of birth: June 27, 1936

Place of birth: Depew, New York

Achievements: Lucille Clifton served as Poet Laureate of Maryland from 1979 to 1982. Her first book, a collection of poetry entitled *Good Times*, was listed as one of the *New York Times* top ten books in 1969.

Countee Cullen (deceased)

Date of birth: March 30, 1903

Place of birth: New York and Baltimore have been given as Cullen's place of birth, but scholars have been unable to confirm where he spent his early years and with whom he spent them. Cullen lists Louisville, Kentucky as his place of birth on a New York University college transcript, but after he received literary fame, he proclaimed New York as his birth place.

Achievements: Countee Cullen received a master of arts at Harvard University. After a fellowship in Paris, he returned to New York and wrote poetry and other literary works during the Harlem Renaissance. He did not want to be defined as a "black" poet, and he was opposed to writing in dialect. He married Yolande DuBois, the only child of W. E. B. DuBois on April 9, 1928. Although it was the most lavish wedding for a black in New York history, the marriage lasted only 2 years.

Lesson Plans

Lesson One - "Empathy"

Teacher Materials

- Transparency of the poem "John, Who is Poor" by Gwendolyn Brooks (number the lines)
- Transparency of my interpretation of the poem found below (your interpretation may differ)
- The book, *Words with Wings: A Treasury of African-American Poetry and Art* selected by Belinda Rochelle
- Transparency of the picture "Gemini I" by Lev T. Mills (it can be found in the book *Words with Wings: A Treasury of African-American Poetry and Art* selected by Belinda Rochelle)

Student Materials

- Three ring notebook
- Paper
- Pen/Pencil
- Three dividers

Note: Provide the above list of supplies to students several weeks prior to beginning the unit or include the items on the school supply list at the beginning of the school year. Have students create a portfolio with three sections:

- Author Study
- Themes
- My Poetry

Provide students with the unit objectives which are:

- To participate in a weekly poetry reading and writing workshops;
- To learn biographical information about poets;
- To produce a portfolio of their own poems;
- To publish their works; and
- To perform before a group of peers during a school assembly in February.

Post the objective somewhere in the classroom. Be sure to include the day of the week when you Note: plan to conduct the workshop. Be consistent. If the day changes, notify students in advance and replace it with another day. After a few workshops, students can manage themselves.

On an overhead projector, have the students view the picture "Gemini I" by Lev T. Mills, then, read the poem "John, Who is Poor" by Gwendolyn Brooks.

My interpretation of the poem is:

Line 1 Implores children to treat John well or be nice to him.

Line 2 Indicates that John is lonely and lives alone.

Line 3 Tell us that John's mother works long hours.

Line 4 Tell us that John's father is dead (it may alternatively suggest that he has abandoned the family).

Line 5 - Brooks is asking children to empathize with John by sharing what food they have. Additionally, she
8 makes another request by saying "do not ask when his hunger will end, Nor yet when it began."

In the "Themes" section of their notebooks, have students write "John, Who is Poor", by Gwendolyn Brooks" at the top of the first page in that section. It is important that everyone's notebook be organized in the same fashion to simplify grading.

Viewing and Analyzing

Place the poem on the overhead projector, and display the picture for everyone to see.

Have students write:

Line 1

Line 2

Line 3 and so on down the page (tell them to skip a line or two).

Have students write their "own" interpretation of each line of the poem. Give them five minutes.

Have a whole class discussion about the author's intended message. Ask students for one word that describes what Brooks is trying to convey.

Put the word "Empathy" on the word wall. Ask students whether they know the meaning of the word. Provide them with the definition, and ask students to analyze the poems for empathetic words or phrases. Ask them why we should feel empathy for John or for John's family.

At the bottom of the page the student is currently working on, have students create a diagram like the one below. Have students write the word "Empathy" and at least three other words or phrases that have similar meanings.

(chart 05.01.02.01 available in print form)

Allow students to share some of the synonyms from their diagram. Inform students that they will be using words from the diagram to write a poem that expresses empathy for a person, place or thing. This is also a good opportunity to review "nouns."

Use these strategies during weekly workshop. Look for opportunities during each workshop to introduce students to techniques used by poets to make their poems more exciting to read like figurative language. Require students to use these skills when they write their own poems.

Lesson Extension

Inform student that the next lesson will require a picture of a person, place or thing. Pictures can be taken from magazines, newspapers or personal photo collections. Make it clear that the object(s) in the picture will be used to write a poem with an empathetic message, so a picture with a celebratory scene may be inappropriate.

Write the word "ecphrastic" on the board or overhead projector, and explain to students that this is a type of

poem. It may be difficult to find the word ecphrastic in a student dictionary, so provide students with the word meaning as defined by the Academy of American Poets: "Ecphrastic poems are now understood to focus only on works of art—usually paintings, photographs, or statues. And modern ecphrastic poems ... have tried to interpret, inhabit, confront, and speak to their subjects." (Academy of American Poets) You may want to paraphrase this definition for younger students by simply saying "Ecphrastic poems are written about or to describe a painting, photograph, or statue."

Lesson Two - "Ecphrasis"

Teacher Materials

- A picture that you, the teacher, like that conveys empathy
- *Words with Wings: A Treasury of African-American Poetry and Art* selected by Belinda Rochelle
- Transparency of the following poem: "Incident" by Countee Cullen
- Transparency of the following picture: "Gemini I" by Lev T. Mills
- A list of sensory words (see, touch, hear, smell, taste)
- Note: The picture and poem can be found in the book.

Student Materials

- Portfolio
- Picture of a person, place or thing

Provide students with the unit objectives, which are:

- To participate in a weekly poetry reading and writing workshops;
- To learn biographical information about poets;
- To produce a portfolios of their own poems;
- To publish their works; and
- To perform before a group of peers during a school assembly in February.
- Note: Post the objective somewhere in the classroom. Be sure to include the day of the week when you plan to conduct the workshop. Be consistent. If the day changes, notify students in advance and replace it with another day. After a few workshops, students can manage themselves.

Viewing and Analyzing

On an overhead projector, have the students view the picture "Gemini I" by Lev T. Mills, then, read the poem "Incident" by Countee Cullen.

Ask students to recall specific details from Cullen's poems that may be reflected in the picture. Some possible answers are:

- There is a boy who appears to be reminiscing about an unpleasant event;
- The boy is black;
- The boy could be eight; and
- The word "Baltimore" appears on a sign.

Connecting

Ask students to refer to the diagram that was created in lesson one. Ask them to use one synonym from the diagram to explain how they might relate to what the boy may be feeling. An example would be:

I "understand" how he must be feeling because I had a similar experience when...

Modeling for students

Display your picture where the entire class can see it. Make a list on the board or overhead projector of everything that is happening in the picture. (Use the *Independent Practice* exercise below as your guide.) Make sure the list has sensory words and that the general theme conveys a sense of empathy. Using the information from the list, write a poem. Make sure students understand that each line should represent a complete thought. Allow students to assist with the process. It may be a good idea to refer back to "John, Who is Poor" by Gwendolyn Brooks and "Incident" by Countee Cullen while you are writing.

Independent Practice

Have the students tape their picture on the second page of the "My Poetry" section of their notebooks. They should complete the following exercise:

- Name everything you see in the picture, particularly things that grab your attention.
- Are there any prevalent colors?
- Can you detect any smells (e.g. food aromas, trash, smoke...?)
- Explain any action - how would it sound?
- Describe any emotions - what feelings do they convey?
- If you could touch something in the picture, how would it feel?
- Note: Write the above activity on the board prior to class to facilitate the process.

Using the information from the activity, have students write a poem.

Cooperative Activity

Allow students to work together when editing.

Lesson Three - "Bullying"

Teacher Materials

- *Words with Wings: A Treasury of African-American Poetry and Art* selected by Belinda Rochelle
- Transparency of the following poem: "Primer" by Rita Dove
- Transparency of the following picture: "School's Out" by Allan Rohan Crite
- Note: The pictures and poems can be found in the book.

Student Materials

- Portfolio

Viewing and Analyzing

On an overhead projector, have the students view the picture "School's Out" by Allan Rohan Crite, then, I will read the poem "Primer" by Rita Dove.

In the "Themes" section of their notebooks, have student write "Primer" by Rita Dove at the top of the second page in that section. It is important that everyone's notebook be organized in the same fashion to simplify grading.

Place the poem on the overhead projector while somehow displaying the picture for the class to see.

Connecting and Independent Practice

Using the poem by Dove, have student write about a situation where they were either bullied, being the bully, or witnessed someone else being bullied. Explain that this information will be used to write a poem similar to "Primer." When writing the poem, students should be allowed to look at Dove's format but not mirror it exactly.

Student Assessment

Teacher Materials

Grading Rubric

Student Materials

Portfolio

Each week, provide students with a grading rubric to place in the pocket of their portfolio. Use the rubric to assign students a weekly grade.

Poetry Portfolio Rubric

(table 05.01.02.01 available in print form)

Conclusion

I hope that this unit will become part of my curricula for upcoming years. My vision is to use some of the poetry written by students during the course of this unit as models for future poetry lessons. The optimum outcome is that students will continue to read and write poetry and look for opportunities to publish their work.

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