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

Making the Relevant Connection: The Middle School Student and Poetry An Understanding and Appreciation of Poetry to Inspire the Poet Within

Curriculum Unit 05.01.03, published September 2005
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Introduction/ Overview

I teach 7th grade students Language Arts in a very large, very diverse middle school in Charlotte, NC. At my school, we are preparing our students to be lifelong learners who achieve academically, behave appropriately and contribute positively. This is our mission. These are our ABC's!

Because I teach in a diverse school, I have a diverse classroom with students from varying backgrounds. My unit is designed for my 7th grade and can be adapted for any academic level and any middle school grade level. My lessons are designed for seventy to eighty minute classes and the entire unit can be spread out over three to four weeks.

In writing this unit, I would like to share a poetry plan that not only can include all Language Arts objectives but also promote the concept of lifelong learner which is one of the cornerstones of the Middle School concept. Studying poetry in the middle school will allow the student to develop an appreciation and understanding of poetry, in hopes that they will still want to read poetry beyond their school years. My poetry unit will be student centered, allowing the students to learn about the medium of poetry while learning about themselves. In my poetry unit, the teacher serves as a role model and guide as well as instructor. It is the cooperative effort on the part of the teacher and student that will best enhance the success of this unit.

The emotional nature of the Middle School student blends well with the emotional nature of poetry. Very often through poems, emotionally developing adolescents can discover much about themselves. Poems allow students a freedom to express themselves in a non-threatening manner. The safety of poetry is what is so welcoming for the middle school student. Middle school is an ever changing and challenging time for the students. It is an emotional time for the students, and they are very often confused. Through poetry, I believe the student can begin to understand their changes as well as their emotions, thus clarifying some of their confusion. So along with the learning the state requires, the students learn about themselves.

I think there is a "poet" inside all of my students. They just aren't aware they are and can be poets! Their poetic side is waiting to be discovered and inspired. In order for this to occur, the classroom must be welcoming, allowing the student to experience many types of poetry and allowing the student to write many

kinds of poems. The welcoming classroom is very much the model of both Georgia Heard and Kenneth Koch. I plan to model a part of my unit on how they inspire the "poet within" in their welcoming classroom.

The poems must also make sense to the students and be relevant to them. By sharing a wide variety of poetry, students can become more familiar with and more comfortable with poetry. The connection to the poetry and the relevance of the poetry grows as the familiarity and comfort levels of the students grow. My unit will encourage the teacher to read as many different poems written by as many different poets as possible

I want the students to read and hear as many poems as possible so they can find their own style of poetry. The student should read and hear traditional poetry as well as contemporary poetry. They should experience serious and humorous poetry. From this wide variety of poets and poems, the student can "connect" with one or more poet or poem, opening the path for the student to understand and appreciate poetry as a medium.

Both Heard and Koch emphasize the variety of the poems as well as the variety of the poets the students should experience. According to Heard and Koch, the welcoming atmosphere, the variety and the relevance all blend to create an educational experience that will be not only challenging for the student but also rewarding. I have used these ideas in my past poetry units and know they will work with this poetry unit. Perhaps it is my own enthusiasm for poetry as well as the ideas of Heard and Koch that make for a successful poetry classroom. The blend of all the ideas and poems and writing create some of the most rewarding times in my classroom not only for my students but for me as well!

A poetry classroom should be one that is encouraging for the student to explore and experience poems. The classroom should foster their ideas and allow those ideas to grow and expand. My unit will have three parts that will let the student learn, grow, and also to understand and appreciate all forms of poetry and poems in stages. Although my unit is in three parts, the parts are not wholly separate from each other and can overlap and work together.

The first section of my unit introduces the student to the immense variety of poetry. They listen to several poems. I like to read several poems at this point, such as "If," by Rudyard Kipling, "Scaffolding," by Seamus Heaney, "Alone," by Maya Angelou and "Journey," by Nikki Giovanni. Also, I have several poetry books on hand and sometimes will choose one randomly. At the start of the unit, students may also contribute poems to be read. We begin reading several poems, discuss them and begin to interpret them. The student begins to discover the language of poetry and the importance of the words used in poems. They begin to see with poets' eyes and hear with poets' ears. They start to see the poetry in their everyday lives and their everyday activities. They begin to think like a poet and are on the way to finding and becoming aware of the poet within. The variety of poetry they read and hear lets them start to relate to the kinds of poems and poets they prefer. The students must "test" many poems and poets before they can find their preference. The variety of poetry read and poets studied is essential in finding their likes and dislikes in poetry. Once they begin to relate to the immense variety of poems, they can begin to become poets!

The second section of my unit comes after the successful completion of the first section. Individual classrooms, as well as students, will take varying amounts of time before the first section is complete. The second section is when the students begin to write their own poetry. They base their poetry on the model of some of the poetry from the first section. Any one of the poems the students have read or heard can be used as a model to start writing their own poems. They can take the idea or the vocabulary or the theme of the

poem to create their own. The modeling of other poetry helps with the student's ideas. So often the students say they can't think of anything to write about. With the modeling of poems, they are given ideas that can become the starting point for their own writing of poetry.

Student writing is also encouraged by using stimuli. Students can write poems based on music, artwork, sounds, topics or everyday objects. These stimuli can be teacher generated or student generated. The music, though, should be instrumental.

With the reading of poetry and the beginnings of writing poetry behind us, we come to the third section of my unit. The third section is the culmination of the first and second section. The third section is where the students produce their own poetry book. This book includes original works as well as their favorite poems and poets. The students will also include a narrative of their personal journey through the labyrinth of poetry. The rubric for this product is very specific. Class time should be given for the third section of my unit as well as homework time. The book is created over a period of time. Again, the amount of time will vary from student to student and from class to class. During this time the teacher should work with the students, being sure to complete all parts of the rubric. Even after the book is completed, turned in and graded, the student should know that their poetry is an ongoing process.

I think the greatness of poetry lies in its personal nature, and in how it can mean so many things to so many people. It is this personal aspect of poetry that makes it so successful in the middle school classroom. At a time when the middle school students have so many questions, perhaps poetry can give them some answers. When the student sees how poetry can become personal, they will enjoy and appreciate all that poetry has to offer them. It is my intention that my unit gives the student this very personal and meaningful experience with poetry to carry with them throughout their educational life as well as beyond.

Rationale

What is poetry? Why teach poetry to the middle school student?

The first question is a difficult one to answer but we attempt to answer this as we move through the poetry unit. Paul H. Fry, William Lampson Professor of English at Yale University, stated during our Yale National Initiative Session on July 8, 2005 that when defining poetry, it is easier to say what poetry is not. For the middle school student though, we need to define poetry. Poetry is sharing thoughts and emotions in lines and stanzas. Poetry is making statements that express feelings and putting those expressions on paper to be read. Poetry is emotions. Poetry is hearing and listening. Poetry is discovering.

The second question is easier to answer. We teach poetry to give the students the chance to feel, think, discover and change. We teach poetry to ask questions and maybe get answers. We teach poetry hoping the poem's thoughts and ideas will turn the students upside down! We teach poetry because it matters and deserves to be taught. As Audre Lord says, "Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within on which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into ideas, then into more tangible action."¹ Because of the nature of the middle school student and the nature of poetry, bringing the two together only seems natural! Poetry is emotional. The middle school student is emotional. They just belong together! Also, it is the freedom of expression of

poetry and the middle school students' need for that freedom of expression that allows for a natural union of the poetry and the middle school student.

Poetry can reach the middle school student because of the nature of its medium. Medium means "middle" and the middle school student is caught "in the middle". The nature of poetry helps them deal with the middle. There is an age of uncertainty and trying to resolve that uncertainty. It is a time of questions. It is a time when they are trying to figure out just who they are. Poetry can often answer the questions and settle some of the uncertainty. Students can often relate to the emotions expressed in the poem, thus helping them deal with their own emotions.

Wiles and Bondi outline several characteristics and needs of the middle school student or adolescent.² One stated need is the need to move inward. This very basic need can result in the student developing self-understanding. Reading poetry, relevant poetry, poetry that connects with the student, helps fulfill that need. Students can read the poem and discover the poet's purpose and meaning while realizing a personal connection with and interpretation of the words of the work. The emotional content of the poem helps the student get in touch with their emotions.

Not only reading poetry but also writing poetry will foster the middle school student's self-discovery and self-expression. The writing of poetry puts down on paper the student's thoughts and ideas and feelings. When they see their emotions on paper, they gain more insight about themselves.

Kenneth Koch, a poet and teacher, used poetry in his classroom to encourage students to write poetry themselves so they could find new ways to say things. His lessons use all forms of poetry as models. Koch wanted his students to know that reading and writing poetry could be about a multitude of ideas, thoughts and subjects. Koch stated reading and writing poetry should be an enjoyable as well as successful experience as long as the classroom is a "safe" and "inspiring" classroom.³ This all works together for the student's personal satisfaction, personal realization and personal discovery!

In my classroom the students always enjoy the poetry unit. I ask them every year why they like poetry and I do get a variety of responses. The main reason they like poetry is because it allows them to express their feelings without restrictions! The middle school student, an adolescent, is all about feelings. The success of my poetry classroom is what keeps me adding to it. I believe poetry is all of us and all around us. Poetry is part of us. Poetry is in us. Poetry asks and answers questions. It talks to us and we talk back. Poetry is voice and poems help my students discover and understand their voice. It is this voice and the finding of this voice that is so crucial to healthy adolescent development. It's hard to be a middle school student but the reading and writing of poetry may help ease the inner turmoil of the adolescent.

Perhaps though, the strongest reason for teaching poetry in the middle school is that the poetry allows the student to get in touch with what is in their heart. Sometimes this is difficult because they normally do not share their feelings. When they do share their feelings it is easier to share through poetry whether it is their own, a friend's or a well-known poet's. It is easier to write about their feelings than talk about them. The written product is a poem that expresses their thoughts, feelings and ideas. Quite simply, this is what every middle school student needs. As Nikki Giovanni writes, "We need food for the soul... we need poetry... we deserve poetry. We owe it to ourselves to re- create ourselves and find a different if not better way to live."⁴

Objectives

The following objectives are in line with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. These objectives fall within the following environments and bring together oral and written language.

Expressive

The expressive domain involves exploring and sharing personal insights and experiences. As authors, the students write and speak for personal, expressive reasons. As a reader or listener (as with poetry), they learn to appreciate the experiences of others.

Informational

The informational domain involves giving information to explain ideas or to teach people what the student wants others to know. The student communicates so the audience gains knowledge from the information given.

Argumentative

The argumentative domain involves defining and defending issues and identifying reasonable solutions to problems. The solutions should be coherent and relevant to the issue at hand.

Critical

The critical domain involves making informed choices. Materials are interpreted and judged and defended with rational ideas.

Strategies

There are many ways to approach the teaching of poetry. When you are teaching poetry in the middle school, though, there are some non-negotiables. One non-negotiable is that the poetry must connect to the students in your classroom. This first non-negotiable brings us to another very important one. The teacher must be a responsible educator by being responsive to the needs of his or her students. The teacher needs to know the students well enough to know what poetry will connect. Some of the choice of poetry for the class will be easy, simply owing to its appropriateness to the adolescent's degree of development. Other poetry choices need to be based on more specific facts about the students themselves, such as gender, demographics and interests. The list of poems I use in my classroom has been developed over several years and is ongoing. Of course a very good way to add to your list is to get the students' suggestions.

I always begin my unit by developing the "poetry friendly" classroom. Both Heard and Koch advocate the importance of the warm, inviting atmosphere of the room to ensure the success of the lessons. Such an atmosphere allows for the students to personally connect, interpret and express ideas about the poems. The "poet within" is developing and being inspired in a safe and friendly atmosphere. The poetry classroom also moves the students to be active in the room instead of passive.

The student is a key factor in developing the poetry classroom. The class develops the poetry classroom together. I have taken several of my ideas from Heard and Koch, and added my own. Throughout the development of the room, students will often want to add their own ideas too. The poetry classroom is ongoing as you move through the unit. Additions and changes will be made according to the progression of your lessons and the ideas of your students.

This unit is planned for the second quarter, allowing you to get to know your students; but this should not be the first time they are exposed to poetry in your room. Your focus is on poetry over the next several weeks, so the classroom should now surround your student with poems, poets and poetry.

There are several items to consider when developing your poetry friendly classroom. The room must allow for your students' minds to stretch, explore and grow. They must be energized by what is around them. They must be inspired by the subject possibilities and their probable success with the poetry. Developing the classroom is a cooperative effort between the teacher and the student.

I always begin with words. We have a bulletin board that only contains words, phrases or excerpts from poems. I call this my word wall, word center, "vivid vocabulary" or "gutsy language". The featuring students as well as the teacher should be adding to the words. Words are put on sentence strips or construction paper and posted on the bulletin board. There should be words for emotions, objects, places, people, things, and pictures or just random words cut out of a magazine or newspaper. Your board is becoming a bank of words the students can use when they need ideas for their own poetry. You can also include critical vocabulary terms such as "figurative language" on your board. This is growing communal board, and all of the students must contribute, even if only one or two words. I always make contributing to the board one of their homework assignments and the students always bring in several words because they want "their" words up in the room and used in the poems they and others will write.

The arrangement of the words is random but as you move along in your unit the placement of the words can change. Quotations, idioms or even phrases from greeting cards can be a part of your word wall. It's important that you as the teacher also add your words to the wall!

Near the word wall I place my poetry book center. All of my personal books are in this center, as well as any I can get from our school media center. The more books the better. Students can bring in their own books too as long as they are labeled with their name. I do not allow the books to be checked out. They are for the classroom only during our unit because the books are used in just about all our lessons. I also include picture books in our poetry book center. The stories and pictures lend themselves very well to the writing of poetry.

The book center is used for the following activities: finding a favorite poem, finding an example of a specific form of poetry, examples of figurative language, poets' names, poems with specific themes, poems about people, places or things, poems you want to write about or new or unknown words you find in the poetry books. Sometimes we just have "free" reading time, during which the students are turned loose in the book center and, after seven to ten minutes, asked to share a new poem. If you are able to get them, area rugs and pillows will add to the atmosphere of the center and the students will be asking to go to the center not only because of the books but also because of the relaxed nature of the area.

I also have a poem center in my classroom where we post poems on a bulletin board. This center includes my favorites as well as the students' favorites. The poems can be their own or that of a published author. This part of the room is usually a homework assignment also and I do not limit how many poems the students can bring into the classroom. These poems are put up for display in the room, and we spend time reading them

before they become part of our poem center. You should try to have a good portion of a wall to devote to this center, as it always fills up fast and then overflows!

There should be a writing center in the poetry classroom. This is for independent writing. The writing center is tucked away in a corner of the room out of the flow of activities. There is a large table with two or three comfortable chairs and maybe a large towel or carpet square for those who want to sit on the floor. Students can use their own writing materials or the materials in the writing center. I always have pencils, pens (a variety of colors), crayons, markers, colored pencils, lined and unlined colored paper, construction paper, glue, scissors, stencils, newspapers and even magazines for the students to use when writing their poetry. It works well if there are at most three students writing at one time. Students are allowed to work in the writing center according to their progress through the unit, their writing ability and their ability to stay on task. They really need strong personal focus to work independently in the writing center. At some point during this poetry unit, all students should be encouraged to work at the independent writing center.

The word wall, the poetry book center and the poem center surround the student with the medium of poetry. The more they are surrounded by poetry the more comfortable they will be with poetry. The room, the comfort level and the materials they contribute draw them into the class and draw them into being active participants in their education. The room is now truly theirs, and they want to succeed in it. The teacher and the students, by developing and designing the poetry classroom together, set the tone for the unit. Students have a say in the organization of the room to make it truly theirs. Because they have designed the room, they want to keep going, keep reading, adding and designing more! That is one of the best parts of this unit; my students want to take part in the class! It doesn't get much better than that when you are a teacher.

All of the students are required to keep a poetry notebook throughout the unit. I call it a poetry journal because the word journal makes the book more personal and less like school work. The students put everything in this notebook, including the notes they take on the mechanics and basics of poetry, classroom warm-ups and their own poems. Their journal also contains their personal reflections, and thoughts about the progress they are making. Each student's journal should be labeled by sections. The sections are warm-up, class notes, class activities, creative ideas, favorite poems and their own poems. This journal is checked every day and will be used every day. I stress the importance of this book from the start of the unit. They also record their contributions to our poetry classroom in their journal. Much of their assessment is contained in this book, so I do encourage them to guard the privacy of their book and be proud of it. But the students rarely need such prompting because their personal contents of the book make them possessive of it.

The first part of my unit is meant to be an introduction to one concept of poetry. I cover the definition of poetry, the types of poetry, the parts of poetry, how to read poetry, figurative language and analyzing the meaning of poems. When beginning to analyze poetry, I like to use Gary Soto's "Oranges." This is a very seventh grade friendly poem. It's about a boy and a girl meeting and then going for a walk. You can discuss the emotions of the boy or the interaction between the boy and the girl. Also, Soto uses many colors in this poem and you can ask what the use of colors adds to the poem. There is figurative language in the poem, too. You could ask, what figurative language does Soto use and what does that add to the meaning of the poem? Just the boy- girl scenario alone will get the students involved in a discussion of the meaning of this poem.

The second section of my unit is aimed at developing the student as a writer of poetry. I use several strategies to develop the writer. Students write poems modeling poems I choose. A good poem to model is "This Is Just To Say" by William Carlos Williams. Another is excerpts from "Song of Myself" by Walt Whitman. One other poem students respond well to is "Me" by Walter De La Mare. Also, students are given several different stimuli

to gather ideas for poems. These include instrumental music, words from the word wall, pictures and artwork, everyday objects, various subjects and sounds, and visuals such as the flame of a candle.

The final part of my unit involves the gathering together of each student's output. This includes their poetry journal, which they have been keeping throughout the unit, as well as a poetry booklet they write and put together. All three stages blend together as the student progresses from one section of the unit to the next. The information and ideas of each section work together, so I do not talk about the three sections to the students. For them, I see each section as a natural progression. I have the unit in three parts for my own information as well as accountability. Keeping the three stages in mind makes it easier to check that I am covering all the information I want to cover for my poetry unit.

There is one teaching strategy that I use throughout all three sections of my unit, namely the use of question stems. Question stems are questions with blanks in them. Based on the poem or other subject matter, the teacher fills in the remainder of the question, tailoring it to the selection being read. I use question stems during the warm-ups of my poetry unit as well as when we are reading and studying individual poems. The same question stems can be used for different selections. The question stems I use in this unit are specific to poetry and figurative language but not to one particular poem. For instance, I ask what the word ____ in line# ____ means or what does ____ symbolize?

I use question stems because the questioning forces the students to think. At the start of the unit I fill in the stem but toward the end of the unit the students are familiar enough with stems that they can fill in the stem specific to the poem. For example, in "Oranges" Soto uses the word "hissing." Using one of the question stems, you as the teacher could ask how the use of hyperbole contributes to the poem. You could also ask students to give an example of figurative language used by Soto, or: "line # contains what type of figurative language?" Actually, I use question stems throughout the year and have varying stems according to what genre or literary device we are studying. The list included in this unit is an ongoing list. I make changes as I see fit and create new stems as needed also. The concept of question stems is based on Bloom's Taxonomy. The questions and the wording of the questions develop critical thinking by having the student pay attention to detail, thus increasing comprehension.

When students are proficient at using question stems, I use the stems as an instructional tool for test taking strategies. By using the stems, the students become the "test makers," completing the stems and giving four answers as choices. They are writing their own test. We start out working in pairs and they only work on one question. As the students are working, I am circulating, checking their work for validity in the question stem completion and the answer choices. When all of the pairs are finished writing their question and answer choices, questions are traded and the "test makers" now become "test takers". The students do enjoy this because they only have to work on one question. They are especially satisfied when they have completed a question stem and written answer choices that stump one of their classmates! Now why would that be?

Question Stems for Poetry/ Figurative Language

1. What is the effect of the author's use of ____ on the theme of the poem?
2. How does the author's use of ____ contribute to the mood/tone of the poem?
3. How is ____ an example of imagery?
4. Which of the following is the best example of a simile?
5. The author uses hyperbole to ____?
6. Why did the author choose to use the following figurative language device in this poem? ____

7. How does the author's use of onomatopoeia contribute to the poem?
8. What does _____ symbolize?
9. What is the rhyme scheme of the poem?
10. In line _____ what does the word _____ mean?
11. Which of the following is the best title for the poem?
12. What is the meaning of the _____ (number) stanza?
13. Line _____ contains which example of figurative language?
14. The author repeats the word _____ for what effect?
15. According to our class discussion, what is the best way to read a poem?
16. In the poem, what does the author mean by _____?
17. Who is the speaker in the poem?
18. What is the message of the poem?
19. What does the author mean when he states _____?
20. What is the most likely reason the author uses the words _____ and _____ in the poem?

I use these stems throughout the unit, even when the students are writing. Students focus on only one question stem at a time. Questioning them as they write gets them to really think about what they are writing. Please refer to this section when I specify question stems in the lesson plans.

The warm-up phase of my unit changes for each one of the three sections of the unit. The first part of the unit uses quotations and excerpts of poems in the warm-ups. Quotations can be chosen by the teacher based on ones the teacher likes or knows. I like to use quotations that are about education or becoming the best person you can become. Excerpts from poems that you use as warm-up can come from the poems the students added to the poem center of your classroom. Students are asked two or three questions about the quotation or poem excerpt that is on the overhead. In section two of the unit we still do some quotation analyzing but I also have the students begin compiling lists such as colors, smells, sounds and tastes. I will also put a "plain" word on the board and ask them to write down five antonyms and synonyms of the word. This activity moves them away from their comfortable words and helps them expand their vocabulary. The analyzing of the quotations and poem excerpts and the creation of the lists all add to the idea bank they can pull from when they write their own poetry. When they begin writing their own poetry in the third section, we still use the warm-up activities from section one and two, but the warm-ups used in the third section are more personal writing. The subject of this personal writing is their thoughts about what they are writing: the progress they are making and the revisions they are making on their poems. Each class, depending on the subjects written upon and the progress of their writing, will determine the nature of this personal writing. All of their warm-ups are put in the warm-up section of their journal and should be in the warm-up section of their journal.

When using quotations or excerpts from poems as your warm-up, there are several language arts devices that the student can be asked to identify as they read the quotation or excerpt. Students can be asked to determine the author's purpose, explaining what the author wants the reader to learn from the quotation or the poem. Students can determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Tone and mood can also be determined. All of this is completed in a short amount of time (five to seven minutes). Students analyze and evaluate in order to develop critical thinking skills. Students may also write their opinion of the quotation or poem and be expected to explain how or why they came to their opinion. This method of warm-up has the student thinking, writing and then discussing. The usual response to the warm-up is only two or three sentences. Keep in mind that question stems can also be used as an assessment tool during the warm-up portion of your lesson.

Section One

The first section of my unit introduces or reintroduces the mechanics of poetry. I look at all of my students as a clean slate when we begin this unit even though they have all had some poetry before they came into my room. The level of the student will determine how long you spend on the first section. I cover the following mechanics in part one. These poetic devices will be introduced to the student in the teacher input part of the lesson and reinforced in the guided and independent practice part of the classroom lesson.

1. *Defining poetry:*

- a. Define the word "poem"
- b. Define the word "poetry"
- c. Types of poetry
- Traditional: in stanza or groups of lines, with meter and often with rhyme
- Free Verse: no rhyme or meter, just strings of thoughts
- American Haiku: 3 line poem: lines 1 and 3 have 5 syllables, line 2 has 7 syllables
- Concrete or Emblem: takes the shape of the poem: an example would be a poem written about an apple takes the shape of an apple
- Limerick: 5 line poem: lines 1, 2 and 5 rhyme, lines 3 and 4 rhyme

2. *How to read poetry:* Some suggestions: Have the students look at the title of the poem and try to decide what the poem is about based on the title. Read the poem aloud more than once. Listen carefully to the sounds of the words. Think about how the words and the sounds work together. Try to form a picture in your mind of the objects, landscapes or actions the poet is describing. Look at the form of the poem to see if this adds to the meaning of the poem. Check the author's use of capitalization, punctuation and spelling to see if this adds more meaning to the poem. Most importantly, read the poem according to punctuation. The poet places punctuation very specifically to aid the reader in the reading of the poem as well as the understanding of the poem. The end of a line doesn't always mean stop. If there is no punctuation at the end of a line, keep reading. Pause at all punctuation marks. But as we all know, at least a slight pause is needed at the end of every line, too, especially in free verse.

3. *Understanding the poetry:* you might try these ideas to help students understand what the poet is saying. Look at all the details of the poem. The details reside in words, phrases, sounds, images, places, objects, and figurative language and have to do with whether the poem has rhyme or is free verse. How the author uses the details will help understand the poem. You can have your students look at parts of the poem and then the whole poem to determine meaning. We always read the poem at least three times to help comprehension. Use of question stems will also help in comprehension. When the students and I begin to understand the poem, we start out at a very general level and then move to the more specific level. We look at theme, which is the general meaning of the poem, and move to the poet's use of language and/ or imagery, which is more specific. Your students' comprehension level will determine how specific you will want to be in interpreting a poem. Often, students will be more and more interested in discussing a poem the more they understand it.

I use the following poems when I begin teaching about understanding the meaning of poetry. These poems are all middle school student friendly and easy for them to understand. Ease of understanding gives students the confidence they need to move onto more difficult poems as we progress in our unit. As we all know, success breeds success!

"Oranges" by Gary Soto

"Not in Vain" by Emily Dickinson

"Scaffolding" by Seamus Heaney

"The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost

"To My Dear and Loving Husband" by Anne Bradstreet

"If" by Rudyard Kipling

Each of these poems is very easy for the middle school student to comprehend. They are by no means the only poems to use at the start of the poetry unit, but I will say that I have used them in the past, they seem to work, and, most importantly, the students like them. I like to think of these as hook poems. They deal with personal choice, relationships and emotions. Each of these elements is very important to the middle school student.

4. *Figurative Language*: I review all of the following terms and give examples of each. All of the figurative language terms are written in the student's journal. "Figurative language" refers to the words and phrases poets and authors use to stir the imagination and create pictures that will appeal to the senses. By using figurative language, the poet draws the reader into the poem, wanting the reader to become a part of the poem and the poem experience.

- Alliteration: repeating the same sound or letter at the beginning of words.
- Sally skipped stones by the sea side.
- Onomatopoeia: using words to recreate sounds, the words can be real or made up.
- Crash, boom, bam, buzz, vroom
- Hyperbole: extreme exaggeration.
- I'm so hungry I could eat a horse.
- Simile: comparing two things using the words like or as.
- She smiled as brightly as the sun.
- Metaphor: comparing two things without using the words like or as.
- The bowl of spaghetti was a mountain of steam.
- Personification: gives an animal or object a personality looking or acting like a real person
- The flames of the fire were dancing.
- Idiom: commonly used expression that has an implied meaning, but doesn't really mean what is said.
- It's raining cats and dogs.
- Imagery: uses words or phrases that appeal to the senses.
- The flashy yellow car raced like a speeding bullet.

I put these definitions and examples on the overhead and allow the students to copy them in their notebook. They bring in examples as homework assignments and go on figurative language scavenger hunts in the classroom. You could have a figurative language center in your classroom if you have enough room, or your students could just add their figurative language examples to the word wall.

Section Two

The second section of my unit is when the students begin their writing of poetry. Usually, several have written poetry prior to my class, which helps at this point. I sometimes have them share some of their poems as we begin this section. I have several activities that give the students ideas for poems.

Warm-ups in part two can continue to be analyzing quotations or excerpts from poems. One new addition here would be idioms. Since they have studied this figurative language device, now may be a time to have them try to figure out the intended meaning of an idiom. Warm-ups in this section also include developing lists of ideas for poems. The lists can be made individually or with a partner. Because this is a warm-up, I try to have them do the activity alone, but sometimes working with a partner gives them more ideas. The list can be made up of synonyms and antonyms for any word off the word wall. You can have them list objects in the room or around the school. Writing about other classes always gets a good response, and the students also enjoy writing about the cafeteria. You can have them make a list of emotions, colors, noises, things they like, things they don't like, words to describe them, a poem of questions, about sports, shoes, hats, food or anything else that they would like to make a list of. You could even have them make a list of lists!!!

One object that I like to use in my classroom is a candle. The students really enjoy this because we turn out the lights and the teacher has matches! Just let the principal know what you are doing in the room. I turn out the lights and light the candle. Just have the students look at the candle for one or two minutes. Then ask them to write down words, just words for now, that describe the candle, the flame, the sounds and what the candle does for the atmosphere of the room. Let the students share their responses. From this, the students can begin putting their words about the candle in poem form. The time on this will vary but after several minutes the students could begin to share their works in progress. All of this is being written in their poetry journal.

I use the same concept when I let the students listen to a musical selection. The musical selection must be instrumental. Again, they write words to describe the music and how they feel listening to the music. I use varieties of music from classical to jazz to rock for them to write their music poetry. From the words they develop phrases and the phrases become their poetry. This is also written in their poetry journal.

Another activity in this section of my unit is having the students write their own poetry modeling a given poem. Kenneth Koch used this writing technique in his classroom. He would suggest that the students use the same theme, form or language that the poem's author used in order to develop their own poems. I have used this technique in my room, and the student writing is very successful. I use the poems listed below when I have the students model their writing. All of these poems speak to the middle school student on a very personal, emotional level. I read the poem and ask the student to write down what the poem means to them. After discussing their thoughts, we talk about the form of the poem and the author's use of language. Students start developing their own vocabulary in line with the theme and form of the model poem, and then begin their writing. They especially enjoy William Carlos Williams's "This is Just to Say." This poem is a "kind of" apology. The writer is somewhat sorry for what he did but at the same time glad he did what he did. It's also a "kind of" love poem, or celebration of domestic life. The middle school student jumps on this theme because they can relate it to personal experience.

Suggested Model Poems:

"Journey," Nikki Giovanni

"Song of Myself," Walt Whitman (section I)

"Dreams," Langston Hughes

"Harlem (Dreams Deferred)," Langston Hughes

"Alone," Maya Angelou

"If I Were In Charge of the World," Judith Viorst

"The Aliens Have Landed," Ken Nesbitt

"Be Glad Your Nose Is On Your Face," Jack Prelutsky

"This Is Just To Say," William Carlos Williams

As the students write, they can share their work and also share any poems they would like to use as a model for their writing. Because of the personal nature of what they write, I do not require students to read their poems aloud. I read them as I check their journals and make any comments privately. When your class is at this part of the unit, it may be a good time to have them thinking about the poetry booklet that will be coming due. They will need to include original works, and they may want to begin deciding which poems to keep.

I do not limit my poetry unit to the poems I have listed in this section or the previous section of my unit. The students and I are adding to our poem center in the room and very often when they are finished with their warm-up I will read one of my "favorites" and ask if they have any of their "favorites" to share before we begin the instructional part of our class. Some of my favorites are "To My Dear and Loving Husband" by Anne Bradstreet, "Sad Underwear" by Judith Viorst, "The Land of Counterpane" by Robert Louis Stevenson, "Annabel Lee" by Edgar Allan Poe and "Jimmy Jet and His T.V. Set" by Shel Silverstein. Actually I read many more! The list is far too extensive to give here. As you go through this unit, begin to create your own "favorite" list. The reading and sharing of poems in this manner continues the warm, inviting atmosphere of the class that we began to create at the start of this unit.

Section Three

- Poetry is a trestle
- spanning the distance between
- what i feel
- and what i say
- Nikki Giovanni⁵

After we have gone through learning or relearning the basics of poetry, exploring writing poetry and developing our appreciation of poetry, we come to the final part of our poetry unit. Hopefully by now your students have been inspired by all their activities in their poetry classroom and have discovered the "poet within." They begin creating their personal poetry booklet. We have discussed this booklet during the second section of our unit, so this project should not be a surprise. I do add a little more in the warm-up part of our

class. I continue using some of the same activities from section one and two but add the following. I have the students complete incomplete sentences. They can be given a very "plain" sentence and asked to use figurative language to liven it up. They may be given an object that they have to describe using vivid vocabulary. All of these writing warm-ups get them ready to be creative when they are writing their poems for their final project.

The poem booklet activities are split between class work and homework. Each day when the warm-up is complete, the students write in their journal what their plan will be for that class period. I check these entries every day as the students are working. This plan helps keep them on task and focused. They can look at what they have completed from the previous classes and plan what they have yet to complete. This project is where they show that they are now looking with poets' eyes and hearing with poets' ears in response to their surroundings. I remind them to use figurative language when writing their poems. I use question stems as they write to encourage critical thinking about their subject. They write and read and reread and rewrite. They can work with a partner, if they choose, to help with their ideas. They can read the poem aloud to themselves or their partner, again, if they choose, to see if the poem sounds right. The process is ongoing and active. The closure of our writing days is letting the students share what they have accomplished for that day. I generally choose the students who will share their progress for that day so I can be sure to hear from all the students throughout the writing section.

Section Three Rubric

Your poetry booklet is due on _____. You must have a total of at least ten (10) poems in your booklet. Seven of the poems must be original and the remaining three can be some of your favorites among those we have read throughout our poetry unit. You may include more than ten but the extra poems must be original poems. Original poems are poems you have written. You may use poems you have written for our classroom activities. There will be the option to present your booklet but it will not count against you if you do not present. If you do make a presentation, you will be given extra credit. It will not count against you if you do not make a presentation. You will be given class time to work on your project and will also be expected to work on your project for homework. All projects must be handed in on time.

THERE WILL BE NO EXCEPTIONS!!!! This poetry booklet counts as TWO TEST GRADES!!!!

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1. Acrostic Name poem (10 points): use the letters of your name to create a poem that describes you. This poem does not have to rhyme. You must use your full name, first and last and cannot use nicknames.
2. Free Verse (10 points): free verse poems do not rhyme and have no set form. This poem should be at least 15 lines long.
Figurative Language poems (10 points each): you must have a total of three poems for the figurative language poems. Each poem must have five examples of a chosen figurative language device. You may
3. choose any three of the figurative language devices that we studied at the beginning of our unit. You need three different examples of figurative language: one for each of your three poems. You may refer to your notes to recall all the figurative language terminology.
4. Emblem poem (10 points): this is a poem that takes the shape of its subject
5. Haiku or Limerick (10 points): you have a choice of including one or the other. Limericks have a rhyme scheme of AABBA and haikus follow a 5-7-5 syllabic pattern.
6. The remaining three poems are your favorites from our unit. (5 points each)

You must have a title cover for your booklet. (5 points) Each poem must be on a separate sheet of paper. You may include pictures and/ or visuals. Neatness and creativity count for ten (10) points. You may write on construction paper or lined paper. Be neat. Be creative. This is your book and this book should reflect your best effort as we finish our poetry unit.

Lesson Plan Format

Each of my classroom lessons follows the same format. You may choose any of the activities outlined in my strategies and plug them in the appropriate section of the lesson. This enables you to tailor your lessons according to what is appropriate for your individual classroom setting. All parts of the plan are included in each of the three sections of my unit as outlined in the strategies.

- Warm-Up: this is the focus: it gets the students on task as they enter the room and sets the learning objective for the day, so choose any of the warm-ups suggested under "strategies," according to what
1. section you are working on at that time. Your warm-up section should take ten minutes. Here you would use a quotation or poem excerpt and have the students explain the quotation or excerpt using the concept of question stems. Allow for discussion.
Teacher Input: this is the specific instructional portion of the lesson: this is only ten to fifteen minutes of your class, or according to how quickly the student comprehends the concept, so choose your activity here according to the section of the unit you are working on. Teacher input can be overhead work, note work, examples of the concept or finding the concept in the poetry books. If you were using the poem
 2. "Oranges," you would read the poem at least two times to the class, asking them to focus on the language while you were reading. After reading, you would ask them to write in their journal what the poem means to them. These ideas would be discussed, paying attention to the strategies on reading poetry and understanding poetry as outlined in the "strategies" section of this unit.
Guided Practice: this portion of the lesson has you, the teacher, taking the students through the activity that will be learned. This reinforces the concept taught in the teacher input part of the lesson. You are walking them through the activity, modeling what they are to do, checking for questions and checking for comprehension concerning the activity, so choose any one of the student activities from the strategy
 3. section and model what the task is for student understanding. This should take ten to fifteen minutes of your class. You may want to ask the students questions based on question stems strategies to check for comprehension. If you were in the writing section of the unit, you would use the poem that you had analyzed as a model for the student writing. Understanding the poem helps when the student is using that poem as a model.
Independent Practice: students are working on their own or with a partner on the assigned task. The teacher circulates, monitoring activity as well as behavior and is available to answer questions or give extra help. This section should take twenty to twenty five minutes of your class. This practice is a
 4. continuation of the guided practice, with the student working on their own using the question stem strategies to develop questions and answers to check for comprehension. If your class is in the writing section of the unit, you would monitor while the students continue their writing.
Assessment: this can be done in a variety of ways according to what section of the unit the class is working on. Assessments can be teacher observation, quiz on figurative language, quiz on forms of poetry,
 5. quiz on rhyme and rhyme scheme, their poetry journal, their contributions to the poetry classroom, read alouds and their final project. Time varies according to assessment
Closure: review, restate and reteach the concept of the day while also reviewing the activity of the day.
 6. This is a good time to randomly ask questions concerning the lesson of the day and lasts approximately ten minutes. You may want to share some of the questions and answers the students developed or have them read some of their writing.

The time frame for each part of the lesson is adjustable, as are the activities of each part of the lesson. If you follow the format and plug in the activities outlined in the previous section you should have a very successful custom lesson for your classroom. Good luck with poetry!

Additional Suggested Poems for the Middle School Student

Angelou, Maya: "And Still I Rise", "Phenomenal Woman"

Blake, William: "The Tyger"

Bourdillon, Francis: "The Night has a Thousand Eyes"

Bradstreet, Anne: "To My Dear and Loving Husband"

Brooks, Gwendolyn: "We Real Cool", "The Bean Eaters"

Browning, Elizabeth B.: "How Do I Love Thee?"

Bunner, Henry: "The Heart of a Tree"

Carroll, Lewis: "Jabberwocky", "Father William"

Cooke, Edmund: "How Did You Die?"

De La Mare, Walter: "Me"

Dickinson, Emily: "I'm Nobody"

Foss, Sam: "The House by the Side of the Road"

Frost, Robert: "Now Close the Window", "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening", "Acquainted with the Night", "Nothing Gold Can Stay"

Gluck, Louise: "Snowdrops", "The Butterfly"

Guest, Edgar: "Sermons We See"

Hayden, Robert: "Those Winter Sundays"

Hughes, Langston: "Mother to Son"

Jonson, Ben: "On My First Son"

Larcon, Lucy: "Plant a Tree"

Lawrence, D.H.: "Nothing to Save", "Trees in the Garden"

Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth: "A Psalm of Life"

Poe, Edgar Allan: "A Dream Within a Dream", "The Raven", "Annabel Lee"

Sandburg, Carl: "Grass"

Stevenson, Robert Louis: "My Shadow", "The Land of Counterpane"

Thomas, Dylan: "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night"

Wilcox, Ella W.: "Solitude"

Wordsworth, William: "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (The Daffodils)

York, Eva Rose: "I Shall Not Pass This Way Again"

Also, any one of the following authors and their poems is very middle school friendly!

Eloise Greenfield

Bruce Lansky

Shel Silverstein

Roald Dahl (his comic verse)

Teacher Bibliography

Cook, Roy J., Ed. *One Hundred and One Famous Poems*. Illinois: Contemporary Publishing Group, 1975. Several of the poems on my suggested reading list are in this book. Wonderful collection of poems!

Giovanni, Nikki. *Love Poems*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1997. This book contains poems about relationships and feelings. Good stuff for older students.

Greenberg, Jan, Ed. *Heart to Heart: New poems Inspired by Twentieth Century American Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001. This book would be good to use when the students are beginning their own writing. There are several poems and pictures to use as models.

Heard, Georgia. *Awakening the Heart: Exploring Poetry in Elementary and Middle School*. New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1998. A great resource that will inspire the teacher as well as the student.

Janeczko, Paul. *Opening a Door: Reading Poetry in the Middle School Classroom*. New York: Scholastic, 2004. More great classroom ideas!

Knorr, Jeff. *An Introduction to Poetry: The River Sings*. New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2004. Great ideas for teaching poetry with several poems as examples.

Koch, Kenneth. *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* New York: Random House, 1973. Great ideas for student writing. Several examples of student poems are in the book which can be used as models when your students write their own poems.

Madden, David. *A Pocketful of Poems: Vintage Verse*. Florida: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1996. A collection of many poems from,

traditional to contemporary.

Writers Corp. *Paint Me Like I Am*. New: Harper Collins, 2003. A book of original works by teens from all over. Great ideas to inspire your writers.

Student Bibliography

Dahl, Roald. *Dirty Beasts*. New York: Puffin Books, 2001. Funny poems about all kinds of "creatures".

Dahl, Roald. *Revolting Rhymes*. New York: Puffin Books, 2003. Collection of poems with an unusual slant on fairy tales.

Greenfield, Eloise. *Honey, I Love and Other Love Poems*. New York: Harper Collins, 1986. Nice poems about families and feelings.

Lansky, Bruce Ed. *A Bad Case of the Giggles*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1994. Funny, funny, funny poems listed by category.

Prelutsky, Jack. *A Pizza the Size of the Sun*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1996. Poems that will take you all kinds of places.

Prelutsky, Jack. *It's Raining Pigs and Noodles*. New York: Harper Collins, 2000. More creative, fun poems for kids.

Silverstein, Shel. *Falling Up*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996. Wonderful characters and ideas make for very entertaining reading.

Silverstein, Shel. *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. New York: HarperCollins, 1974. More poems to entertain and delight your imagination with a message in each poem.

Viorst, Judith. *If I Were In Charge of the World*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1981. Fun poems about kids issues.

Viorst, Judith. *Sad Underwear*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 2000. More funny poems about kids and the things they do.

Notes

1 Knorr, Jeff. *An Introduction to Poetry: The River Sings*. New Jersey: Pearson

Education, Inc., 2004. (p2)

2 Bondi, Joseph and Jon Wiles. *The Essential Middle School*. Ohio: Charles E. Merrill

Company, 1981.

3 Koch, Kenneth. *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* New York: Random House, 1973.

(Introduction)

4 Writers Corps. *Paint Me Like I Am*. New York: Harper Collins, 2003. (Forward by

Nikki Giovanni)

5 Giovanni, Nikki. *Love Poems*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1997.

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