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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2008 Volume II: American Voices: Listening to Fiction, Poetry, and Prose

The Poetry of Self: Using American Voices to Shape Your Own Voice

Curriculum Unit 08.02.02, published September 2008
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Overview

After teaching middle school students for a few years, I've realized that these students are mere clones of what they see on television and in movies. They have no idea of who they are as individuals. While teaching them poetry will not be the answer to all the questions they may have about who they are, where they've come from and where they're going, it can help them voice some of the emotions they may begin to feel along their journey to self-discovery. Throughout this unit, students learn to appreciate the difference that using their own voice can make in the interpretation of a piece of writing. They learn that there are many ways of expressing themselves and see that they have a voice that can become powerful, whether or not it is heard. The students will learn that their voices are essentially their backgrounds or identities. They've come from somewhere that is important and it's now necessary that everyone knows.

This unit, produced as a result of the American Voices seminar, combines poetry writing and interpretation, poetry in performance, and various American authors and poets. I teach eighth grade Communications (English grammar and Reading combined) at an arts academy. Our school works in partnership with a local arts organization, Manchester Craftsmen's Guild (MCG) to integrate arts into the curriculum.

In this unit, the students will find their voices by completing a myriad of reading and writing exercises. Those newly found and/or formed voices will enable the students to create their own individual poetry anthologies, a class anthology, and to deliver a poetic monologue, about a topic of their choosing, to an audience. With the assistance of MCG, the monologues will be audio and/or video recorded for the students.

Rationale

Since politics has recently been discovered by a group of Americans that had, up to this point in history, been relatively voiceless—young Black Americans—some educators are taking advantage of the opportunity to assist that demographic in finding a voice and also teaching them that it's powerful and should be used. Many high school seniors and college freshmen voted for the next prospective President of the United States in their

local primary elections, thus initiating their roles in a process that once rendered them voiceless. Although my eighth grade students are years away from participating in any similar democratic process, it can't be too early to make them familiar with using their voices. Many of our Black students seldom realize that they not only have a voice, but a powerful one with possibilities.

These possibilities will be realized by using the most compressed form of writing—poetry. Reading and using poetic devices and powerful words will help the students become more accustomed to hearing and using language. Initially to the students, politics will only be words about issues that they may or may not understand. Through the political process, due to unfold this fall, students will understand that a dialogue between them and the people who make decisions needs to begin because they—the students—are important.

With the use of a variety of American authors and poets, I created this unit to help students learn to interpret poetry, express themselves through crafting poetry, and learn to effectively write and speak using their voices. This practice of active self-expression will become their norm, as opposed to simply delivering assignments that have no meaning and don't relate to their lives. The students will write many poems that tell about their experiences. They will read poems that will help them to see themselves in relation to the rest of the world. While the majority of the authors and works studied throughout this unit will be American: Walt Whitman's "I Sing America," Langston Hughes's "I, Too," narrative by Sandra Cisneros, etc., I'll introduce a number of foreign poets as well. One of those is Pablo Neruda and his "Ode to Thanks," which is in our class literature book.

Our students' knowledge of other cultures and historical events is quite limited to what cable and local network producers choose to show them on television. These movies and shows are clearly not representative of everything that goes on in the real world. Poetry, however, authorizes the reader to enter into the essence of other cultures and even one's own. Students will read, write and speak poetry to gain more incite into their own lives. All poetry is open to interpretation. Even narrative poems, that generally tell a linear story, may contain figurative language to make a reader think twice. The reader's own experiences make the difference. An example of this was revealed during seminar while discussing Langston Hughes's "A Negro Speaks of Rivers." We couldn't come to a consensus on many issues like: How many speakers were present? Why the speaker chose to speak of/identify with rivers? Why Hughes chose to change verb tenses within the poem, even within a line? We all had our reasons and answers to these questions. Our reasons for those reasons stem back to our individual identities.

I chose to link this unit of voice with poetry because of the dreamscape possibilities that poetry affords. When writing prose, fiction or non, intricate detail is necessary for the author to deliver his intended message to his audience. Because poetry can be imagined, and is open to interpretation, the author can be discriminating in word choices, details, etc. Prose tends to focus more on character, plot and setting, while the heart of poetry is the language and how it is used to convey messages. Many different readers can experience the same poem differently. According to Robert Pinsky, [1] "...the vocality of poetry, involving the mind's energy as it moves toward speech...also involves the creation of something like...a social presence." Poetry creates a language that invokes a shared public intimacy. By nature, Americans have become so individualized that we are more the same. To some extent, poetry makes us vocal individuals being affected differently by the same work.

Background

In this unit, students will be charged with three tasks: interpreting, writing and performing poetry. Because of the differences in how students in urban settings speak the prescribed language, it is often an arduous task for them to interpret meaning, make inferences, and, in some cases, simply read. For students who already have problems with learning "proper English," it may be appropriate for teachers to use materials designed for English language learners to provide assistance with comprehending poetry.

Analyzing Written Language vs. Spoken Language

- "*Literature...is viewed as part of the continuous growth of linguistic activity; as a*
- means of deepening and reinforcing the learning of various aspects of language.
- That includes the three components of language: phonology, syntax and semantics
- plus other aspects of language in use."
- Mabel Osakwe. *Poetrymate* [2]

The closer a person's spoken language is to the language he is reading, the easier it will be to learn to read. The ease of learning does not ensure success; nor does the difficulty promise failure. All people learning to read English actually encounter language structures that differ somewhat from their spoken language. How then do students know when to draw the line between these differences? At what point does the learner go so far from the standard as to move fully into a dialect? Because this line is imaginary, there are some aspects of dialect differences that may impact the reading process for students and the instruction process of those who teach dialect-speaking students.

General knowledge about the nature of language diversity is required. Without understanding the systematic and patterned nature of differences, it is difficult for teachers to appreciate dialects for what they are—natural subgroupings in a language. Teachers also need to have knowledge of particular structures in the dialects spoken by their students, whether they are standard or vernacular. They need to examine assumptions about children's background knowledge and compare them with the experiences that students actually bring to the text. Understanding the role that reading and writing play or do not play in students' homes and communities can help a teacher to make reading experiences more congruent with students' expectations and thus more meaningful. Anything taught out of context tends not to generalize very well.

To begin with interpreting in this unit, students will be asked to read and respond to a free verse poem that is easily interpreted. The poem, which is included in our eighth grade literature book, "Introduction to Poetry" by Billy Collins, is his definition of poetry.

- I ask them to take a poem
- and hold it up to the light
- like a color slide
- or press its ear against it's hive.
- I say drop a mouse into a poem
- and watch him probe his way out,
- or walk inside the poem's room
- and feel the walls for a light switch.
- I want them to waterski

- across the surface of a poem
- waving at the author's name at the shore.
- But all they want to do
- is tie the poem to a chair with rope
- and torture a confession out of it.
- They begin beating it with a hose
- to find out what it really means. [3]

This poem, while it is simple, has several examples of figurative language and other poetic devices that may be complex upon a student's first read. Poetry in its simplest form is language at its best. The first questions for the students might be *Whose voice do you hear? What are some examples of figurative language? What is being compared to what? What does the speaker want?* The author's voice is most audible here because it's written in first person point of view. Students often confuse the author and the speaker. So their answer regarding voice will most likely be "Billy Collins." This answer leads to the questions, *What do you think Billy Collins is like as a person? What is he like in the poem?* These are leading questions that send us to the author's biography in the "Meet the Writers" section of the anthology. The examples of figurative language present are simile, metaphor and personification. The poem itself is being compared to many things here: a color slide, a maze, a house, an ocean or body of water and a hostage. The students may not have first hand experience with everything being compared, but they should recognize them all. They may have trouble with identifying all of the comparisons, though. But taken line by line, the poem is easily understood. The speaker in this poem wants nothing more than for the poem to be read and enjoyed rather than interpreted to death as readers tend to do.

Beginning with a straightforward poem that reads fairly linearly offers some assurance to students that poetry doesn't necessarily have to be out of reach. With every poem introduced throughout the unit, students will work in pairs or in groups for analysis. Later in the unit we'll compare more complex works by two poets, Whitman and Hughes, with contrasting lives and styles, but with similar topics—their America. These poems, when they are interpreted, enable students to analyze the America in which they live.

Voice

- "*Plenty of influential critics and sociologists say that the 'self' is nothing but a*
- collection of roles."
- Peter Elbow, ed. *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing* [4]

In teaching students to read and write poetry, the most difficult task could by asking them to use poetry with the purpose of finding voice. But what exactly does it mean to find your voice? Everyone who can speak has a voice. So once a word is spoken the voice has been found, right? The answer to this question is yes and no. In the introduction to his book *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*, editor Peter Elbow examines the five meanings of voice and describes their meanings. His five categorizes are as follows: audible voice or intonation, dramatic voice, recognizable or distinctive voice, voice with authority, and voice as resonance or presence.

Audible voice is what literally comes out of the body. Metaphorically, audible voice can be easily heard in writing, if the reader is familiar with the language and syntax. When a writer uses language that is easy to understand, not necessarily elementary, and sentences that are structurally sound, his voice comes from the page effortlessly. This is especially evident in creative writing. But my students have been culturally programmed to keep the human voice out of writing. They've been told not to write essays in first person and

to remember their audience so they don't begin to use speech that they'd use with a friend or slang. For this reason, poetry is a perfect vehicle to find or express voice. Poetry, too, has rules depending upon the type, but as a genre it gives the writer license to be creative.

The fact that every text has an author implies that it also has dramatic voice because voice and identity are one in the same. But they don't always have to be the same. Using parentheticals can sometimes help distinguish between dramatic voice and audible voice. Dramatic voice can also be described as the speaker's alter ego. Although writing allows an author to take on another persona(s), many beginning writers, as I've experienced in my classes, still find it difficult to fully let go of themselves on the written page. In some cases, dramatic voice is the equivalent to the writer saying, "I have a friend who….," when they're actually talking about themselves. Using dramatic voice allows the writer to write as someone they are not, or even pretend to do so.

The recognizable or distinctive voice is akin to a signature. But just as writing analysts have the ability to see things about an individual through that signature, a writer's signature or style is nothing more than that—a style. It's very possible that the voice that comes through in writing can change as the author's mood changes. While students are attempting to find their voices, they may discover nothing more than a comfort level in expressing themselves that they didn't have before their search.

Writing in a voice with authority essentially makes the author "own" his writing. Others can neither take credit nor be held responsible for the writing except the author. This speaks to the author's expertise in his subject matter. That subject matter can be scholarly or something more personal like the "type" of people that a particular geographical area breeds.

The resonant voice or presence means that the author's self is getting behind the words. This, the most arguable of those listed, requires the reader to "make inferences about the relation between the present text and the absent writer," [5] but doesn't necessarily speak to identity or self. The other four definitions of voice are less problematic in that they're more easily identifiable. For a text to resonate with a reader, a level of trust needs to be established. Sometimes the reader doesn't trust the author's sincerity which can be due to one or more factors: the writer's inexperience, for example, or experimentation or game playing with the reader. Resonance is difficult to decipher because it deals mostly with the relationship between the reader and the writer. What resonates with one reader can potentially have no effect on another.

It's plausible that students will write using more than one of the above examples of voice at one time. We will have a discussion about the different types and develop simpler working definitions for the students. However, students will be responsible for identifying the type of voice present in poems they read as well as what they write.

Poetry

Before the poetry unit begins and the students hear that we'll be reading their work, as well as that of published authors, aloud in class, they immediately close their minds and withdraw from the learning process because poetry, as they know it, is something that takes creativity and talent; it's hard. They also think it has to rhyme. But as we write more and they begin to see themselves in their writing, they realize that hearing what they've written only improves their writing and boosts their confidence. They also see that new discoveries are made in second and third readings of the same poem, especially with different readers. The same words spoken with different inflection, speed and/or intonation can have different meanings. During seminar, we performed an exercise where either sets of readers or an individual reader read a group of lines

taken from a Robert Frost letter to John T. Bartlett and were asked to identify the voice(s).

- You mean to tell me you can't read?
- I said no such thing.
- Well read then.
- You're not my teacher.
- On-two-three—go!
- No good! Come back—come back.
- Haslam go down there and make those kids get out of the track. [6]

In this exercise, the audible and dramatic voices varied so, few fellows could agree upon the number of voices present or even when one ended and another began. In the second group of lines, some fellows identified one speaker. Some saw two speakers, alternating lines. Some saw three speakers, each with one line. The disparity came, not only in how the lines were spoken, but also in each fellow's prior knowledge on the subject of track and racing. I'll use a similar exercise for the eighth grade students because it is so flexible. These lines prove that poetry can be real or imagined. To read or write poetry, one must grasp the actual words and devices that are being used; however, the experience does not have to be real. That goes for reading and writing poetry. It allows the writer, reader and/or performer to go outside themselves and the real world.

Questions I will pose to students regarding voice include: How do you speak what you read? How do you write what you hear? Who is speaking (in written as well as read poems)? What is the speaker's identity? Does identity change the speaker's perception of himself in relation to the others? We will try many writing exercises, which will become conversation starters for the written page. One of my favorite writing exercises is a poem template called "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon. It's an assignment that I've done myself every year that I've had my own classroom and it changes every year. I take this to mean that my voice changes every year, slightly. Most of the lines in the template begin the same way—*I am from*—and the writer fills in the blanks with the specific text in parentheses, which varies from adjectives to family traditions to location of family mementos. No two students in my classes have ever created the same poem and rarely do they have similar lines.

My curriculum offers several ideas for getting students to create poetry. One of Kenneth Koch's ideas from his book *I Never Told Anybody* is to introduce a new exercise every day, which I will do for one week of the unit. An exercise similar to something I've already done is to include a color in every line of a poem. Many eighth grade students have a favorite color and that color symbolizes something different for each of them. What the students have probably never done is to think of colors as ways to represent their thoughts and feelings.

Another suggestion that I received from a parent is to play music while the students write. One of her daughter's teachers uses classical music to inspire the students' pens to keep moving. My plan is to use classical music because there are no words to distract from the writing process.

We will also listen to authors reciting poetry, performances and readings. Our anthology contains a set of CD recordings of some of the poems and other short stories in the book. The works are sometimes, but not always read by the author. Many are good and induce the feelings that the author intended. I also have recordings of local poetry events that could possibly spark interest or provide fodder for the assigned rehearsed reading.

Poetic Devices and Figurative Language

Without practice, analyzing a poem can be a conversation that sticks in the writer's throat or stays jumbled in

one's brain. Having a clear shared vocabulary with which to begin the discourse serves a major purpose.

Alliteration: a repetition of initial consonant sounds in nearby words (as in "to jiggle and jump for joy").

Allusion: an indirect reference to another literary work or to a famous person, place or event.

Assonance: repetition of vowels without repetition of consonants (as in stony and holy) used as an alternative to rhyme in verse.

Free verse: Poetry that is based on the irregular rhythmic cadence or the recurrence, with variations, of phrases, images, and syntactical patterns rather than the conventional use of meter.

Hyperbole: a figure of speech in which the truth is exaggerated for emphasis or for humorous effect.

Metaphor: a direct comparison with no signal word (such as "Jealousy is a green-eyed monster").

Meter: a repeated rhythmic pattern.

- *Mary had a little lamb*
- whose fleece was white as snow
- and everywhere that Mary went
- the lamb was sure to go.

Onomatopoeia: the use of words—like snort, clank, and whir—that sound like what they refer to.

Personification: a type of figurative language in which animals, inanimate objects, or ideas are given human qualities (as in "The teakettle ordered us back to the kitchen").

Rhyme: like of sounds at the ends of words (as in suite, heat, and complete).

Rhythm: the pattern of sound created by the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line.

Simile: a comparison using like or as (such as "My life is like an open book").

Poetry in Performance

- "*Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell*
- and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are
- reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic,
- sometimes semiconscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue."
- Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self*

The most challenging aspect of this unit will be to get the students to want to volunteer to perform their own poetry in front of a group outside the comfort of our safe haven. Once taken out of their comfort zones, many students have trouble communicating with the rest of the world and they shut down completely. For instance, when I was growing up, I was a very outgoing, athletic child. I grew up in a close knit urban community where I had the confidence to accomplish anything. My family moved from my "home" when I was 12 years old and that was the end of my athletic and academic perseverance. I lost my voice. From then on, I coasted through school unscathed and used my journals as a way to express myself, but only in private.

Voiceless students in the traditional classroom often resort to alternate means of articulation for themselves through other creative outlets. A good idea for an icebreaker before writing the performance piece is to have the students give themselves a descriptive, alliterative name that boosts confidence and also transforms them into a character. William's new name would be *Wonderful* William, *Amazing* Andrew, *Breathtaking* Bridgette, etc.

Instead of the performance piece being merely a poetry reading, I want it to be more of a rehearsed reading or poetry monologue. As students are composing and developing monologues, we will hold workshop-like sessions where they can do read alouds and receive feedback from their peers. During these workshops, peers' likes and dislikes are irrelevant. All feedback should begin with positive comments and then move on to helpful hints or what could make the piece better. That way, writers will be less defensive. The content of the monologue will also have a focus—what the character wants. If done correctly, the audience's analysis of the monologue will make sense of the message being conveyed: who the character is, who the character is speaking to, what the character wants from the audience/another character, and how the character will get what they want.

Due to their lack of acting experience and my lack of knowledge of teaching the art of acting, I share tips with them on how to improve their speaking skills. (See *Poetry in Performance* in Appendix.) The teaching artists and technology experts at MCG will provide assistance with the aesthetics, so the performances will be pleasing to the untrained eye.

Objectives

The main objectives for this unit are for the students to become more confident writers and speakers, write a poetry anthology and perform their monologues or rehearsed readings of original poetry for an audience. The performance expectations align directly to Pittsburgh Public Schools' Core Curriculum for eighth grade, which states that students will be able to "recognize and understand the characteristics of poetry, including rhyme, rhythm, meter and figurative language." I'll use the *Elements of Literature* text, our classroom text, to introduce the students to poetry. It includes a number of uncomplicated, rhyming and narrative poems that contain elements more easily understood by the learner. Students will be asked to do a number of things:

"Identify characteristics of and write a narrative poem in free verse" and "Write poetry that comes from daily experiences and emotions." Once the students know the characteristics of narrative poetry, they will read more complex poems by various authors, including Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes. They will then compose their own narrative poems based on several exercises including one that asks them to retell a dream using imagery. For another, they will borrow a poet's style and voice by mimicking the first few words of the first few lines of a poem and complete the rest of the sentences with their own words.

"Recognize and analyze the effect of various literary devices, including sound techniques and figurative language." Students will define, create an example and later practice recognition of the following poetic and sound devices: alliteration, allusion, assonance, free verse, hyperbole, metaphor, meter, onomatopoeia, personification, rhyme, rhythm, and simile.

"Identify various poetic forms, including ballads, epics, odes and sonnets" and "Recognize and analyze the

ways that poets are able to use everyday language and events to convey strong emotion." To help students better understand that different poets from different eras from different backgrounds develop different poems, they will complete a one day Internet Poetry Workshop. (For more explicit detail, see Classroom Activities section.) Exposing the students to the numerous forms of poetry through this workshop will establish an appreciation for other poets' works that may have never occurred.

"Create a poetry anthology." One of the culminating projects for this unit is the poetry anthology—a collection of poetry and writings about poetry. Students will complete their own anthology that will contain mostly their own poems. The other printed document will be a class poetry anthology. While the students' individual anthologies will be comprised of their own poems and others, the class anthology will be a collection (no more than four each) of only the students' favorite poems written throughout the unit.

"Read poetry aloud." For many students, reading aloud is the equivalent of oral surgery or worse. We will, of course, read the published poetry aloud (because there is no other way to read poetry) and I'll initially take volunteers to share their newly crafted poems but then partner the shy writers with more vocal writers. Another of the culminating projects will be a performance or rehearsed reading of poetry.

Strategies

From the time that students first enter a classroom, they are asked to give all of themselves to a person they don't know. Young children need to have confidence to raise their hands. They need to feel that intimacy with the teacher and fellow classmates; that intimacy requires trust. It is the teacher's responsibility to initiate a relationship and to establish the level of trust necessary for all parties to accomplish their goals. For the student, those goals are to complete every assignment so they can get good grades and learn as much as possible. The teacher has many goals that depend on the grade level and student population. However, they all want to share the knowledge of their subject matter with the students and help them learn. But how does the teacher initially establish that trust?

The first order of business for this unit will be to establish the trust of the three classes of students that will be assigned to my class. I've been told by other teachers who have either walked by my class or have done a formal observation that in my class the students seem to be a cohesive group that work well together. I think that cohesiveness grows out of a comfort level that is established by structure. Through this structure I've created a safe haven for communication. Students learn the rules and systems of the class on the first day of school and they do not change. I do not get more lenient with the rules as I gain their trust. I also learn their names on the first day of school. It makes them feel important when this person whom they've never met is referring to them specifically, speaking to them as a human being and not just another student. Early in the school year, the students and I establish a rapport and we have an unspoken rule that what happens in our class stays within our class. That doesn't mean that illegal things happen or that we break school rules. It simply means that unless they give permission, work that is created in that classroom is not shared outside of the room. The majority of the time, they are so proud of what they've created that not sharing it would be criminal in their minds. The second element of that unspoken rule is that other teachers will never be responsible for giving assignments in my class. That means I can't be absent. Of course there are times that I can't be there, but I always leave assignments in the same format that they're used to.

Experiential learning is the strategy I've learned that works the best with all writing lessons and in life. If students have the opportunity to see examples of what they're being asked to produce, it lets them know that the task can actually be done. This practice works especially well if the modeling is done during class while they watch. The students also read and analyze similar works completed in prior years to get ideas for their own work, although I try to steer clear of student models that might easily be duplicated.

Many of the strategies that I will use in this unit are those that I've used in prior units and are not unlike those of other teachers of the same subject matter. I have a number of ideas to help my students learn their voices using a mixture of American poets and authors. Our curriculum currently includes writing a poetry anthology. The anthology of old focused mostly on poetic devices and forms. The new anthology will focus more on the poet. While learning to identify the devices and forms will still have their place in the unit, those lessons will not govern the direction. The anthology consists of poems the students write themselves, a couple from classmates that were written during the unit, and poems they've found by published authors that they like.

Classroom Activities

The proposed length of time for this poetry unit is five weeks plus time for performances. It can, of course, be lengthened or shortened to fit the needs of specific classes. I've broken the activities down by weeks so it may seem like an overabundance of work for the students, but I should also note that I teach 90 minute blocks and those who don't can pick and choose activities as needed.

Week One: Reading and Interpreting

In this first week, students will write a collaborative poem as a class, learn to identify and use poetic devices and figurative language, compare/contrast two poems, learn to hear "voice" in poetry and create alliterative names for themselves.

Collaborative Poem

The theme of this poetry unit is self. While every poem students write during the unit will not be about themselves, what they do write will contain their feelings about particular subjects. Depending upon the subject, these could be newly discovered feelings. I'll present the students with a photo of something in their neighborhood that they may have never noticed. With no explanation of it, I ask them to describe what they see. This should be done either in groups with partners. After the students have completed their written descriptions we discuss them as a class. We then compose a poem, as a class, that the majority agrees upon. This activity initiates a healthy dialogue about what poetry is "supposed" to look like.

Poetic Devices and Figurative Language

After that first poem is completed, I introduce the poetic devices and figurative language as an attempt to revise what we've created. Our anthology, Holt's *Elements of Literature*, has an introduction to poetry that includes many of the devices listed on the sheet that I distribute (see list under Background). The terms are used in context in the book as well.

Compare/Contrast Two Poems

We then begin reading poetry. We start with the types the students are used to: poems with end rhymes, "Introduction to Poetry" by Billy Collins; poems about poetry, "Valentine for Ernest Mann" by Naomi Shihab Nye; and narrative poems, "Paul Revere's Ride" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Our anthology also includes tips on "How to Read a Poem." Each poem is read at least twice in class and we interpret their meanings. I've tried to instill in the students that there is no wrong way to interpret a poem, and we sometimes manage to veer far off topic.

In keeping with the theme of "self" and "creating a voice," the poems we compare are Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" and Langston Hughes's "I, Too." These two poems celebrate each author's vision of the America in which they live. Whitman's praises the spirit, energy and strength of workers who are strengthening America. Hughes's poem, a response to Whitman's, speaks of an America where Black Americans have been left out but also of hope for their futures. Both are written in free verse and contain many examples of figurative language and imagery. They're prime initiators of a discussion of where students might see themselves in America today, as well as if race, class, and gender have an effect on how they're treated.

Find Voice in Writing

The notion of writing with a "voice" is a complex idea to expect eighth grade students to comprehend, not to mention to expect them to produce a piece of writing with the goal of using "voice." I will not put too much emphasis on the many definitions of voice previously listed. I will, however, touch on the differences between "audible voice" and "dramatic voice" and how they can be used. Exercises like the one mentioned in the Background section of this document will aid in the discussion. Again, we will establish our own, simpler definitions.

Create Alliterative Names for Themselves

Before the students begin to write their own poetry, they have the option to take on a pen name, or new identity. They can also choose whether or not they always write as their alter ego. The name change allows the students to use their dramatic voice, or the liberty to be vocal. Also, when we interpret poems in class, we always make reference to the "speaker" rather than the author by name.

Week Two: Writing Free Verse and Other Poem Types

This week, the students will begin crafting their own poetry. They read and interpret many different types and styles of poetry and put their knowledge into practice. Then they conduct their own searches to find poems that resonate with them personally.

What is Poetry?

The first individual poem that the students write begins with a sentence-starter (see Appendix B) that I give them to complete for homework. The students complete the sentences using figurative language and then create three more sentences of their own. When they return the completed assignment, I let them know that they've written their first poem. I usually don't let them revise this one just so we can see their growth from the beginning to the end of the unit.

Conventions of Odes, Ballads, Sonnets, etc.

In this second week, we move on to more complex poems and away from the nursery-rhyme-like poetry. We

read, and listen to on our anthology's accompanying CD, longer narratives, both in and outside of the anthology, like "The Cremation of Sam McGee" by Robert W. Service, ballads and epics, "Casey at the Bat" by Ernest Lawrence Thayer. We read "Ode to Thanks" by Pablo Neruda and very few sonnets.

Write Poetry

The students then have the choice of writing a poem in one of the styles we've studied so far. Most of them write narratives with end rhymes. They also like odes. Before this assignment, they come up with a list of things they would like to celebrate or praise. I've odes to birthdays, boys, ice cream, candy and hair weaves.

Conduct "Internet Poetry Workshop"

By the end of the week, most of the students will be eager to read more poetry. This is the perfect time to conduct the "Internet Poetry Workshop." During this workshop, students search a limited list of websites to read poetry of poet's to whom they might never have been introduced. I give them the links to the sites as well as a worksheet (see Appendix C) to complete explaining which poems they liked and why. Their favorites are copied and stored for future use in their anthologies. They are required to find at least one of the following types of poems: ballad, sonnet, ode.

Week Three: New Daily Poem

This week is dedicated to writing, revising and typing poems. A new poem idea/activity is introduced every day and completed for homework, if not by the end of class. When the students feel like they have a perfect piece, and it's been reviewed by at least one other student, they can add it to the list of poems they've begun to compile.

Color Poem

Many students have a favorite color and in some cases that color means a lot to them, in others it means nothing at all. For this assignment, the students choose one color and write a poem that has that color in every line. Depending on the student that color can take on several different forms and/or parts of speech.

Imagery Poem

This assignment asks students to copy the form of another poet. I choose a short poem with vivid imagery and ask the students to mimic what the poet has done along the lines of sensory details. For example, the poem "Dust and Rain" from Karen Hesse's novel Out of the Dust reads:

- On Sunday
- winds came,
- bringing red dust
- like prairie fire,
- hot and peppery,
- searing the inside of my nose,
- the whites of my eyes.
- Roaring dust,
- turning the day from sunlight to midnight.

The following is a rewrite of the same poem mimicking the sensory detail.

- Then January
- snows came,
- blurring the landscape
- like cold feathers
- soft and freezing
- sticking to clothes and eyelashes
- trapping my feet
- Swirling snow
- turning the dreary winter to brightness.

Portraiture

The students write a portraiture poem about another person whom you have observed. They might write about a family member, a close friend, or someone they don't know well, just as long as it's someone they've seen before. Before this assignment they will read poems that paint portraits of others without "listing" their characteristics. What does this person look like? How do they feel about this person? How would they describe this person (aside from their looks)? All of these questions could be answered in a simple narrative poem.

Where I'm From

This sentence starter is similar to a mad lib. The "Where I'm From" template, created by George Ella Lyon, [7] specifies exactly what parts of speech, family traits, locations, etc. will be used to fill in the blanks. Some of the vocabulary in the template may need to be simplified for students before they begin. It looks like a lengthy assignment so as much clarification prior to the start will benefit all. Regardless of how similar any two students in the class may be, no two of these poems will be alike. This assignment tends to get students thinking more abstractly about themselves and the world in which they live. I use this for a project that comes up in week four.

Poem Starter

This last poem is one that the students will write about themselves. This is saved for last because they've experienced many poems over the past few weeks, poems written both by peers and professionals. By this time, they may think that their writing has "style" and even a "voice." The students will write borrowing from another Karen Hesse poem call "Midnight Truth." This sentence-starter begins with the following two lines:

I'm so filled with

It comes from

But unlike the other poem where essentially every line is mimicked, the students are free to write as much or as little as they'd like. They can choose to follow the model or not.

Week Four: Compile Poetry Anthology

This week is practically spent in the computer lab. I give the students the criteria for their anthologies which includes at least ten poems: five of their own, two from friends for classmates (everyone must share at least two poems), their class collaborative, and two from the workshop. Students will finish typing all original poems, an introduction to every poem they plan to include in the anthology, an introduction to the anthology itself, a table of contents and a cover.

Diary Portraits Project

As mentioned earlier, my school has partnered with an arts organization to integrate arts into our curriculum. One of the most popular projects within the school is the Diary Portraits. The way it started was, an MCG teaching artists took digital photos of the students' neighborhood, which were used for backgrounds, and then of each of the students. Using Adobe Photoshop, which the students and I learned while working on the project, the students combined the neighborhood photos, student photos and their "Where I'm From" poems to create a full-color masterpiece that makes them proud.

Week Five: Practice for performance

This is practice week. Students will choose number of poems they want to perform in front of an audience. I will suggest no more than two because I want it to be more of a performance than a reading of their work. I will provide students with a tip sheet called "Poetry in Performance" to help them through the week (see Appendix D). Students should practice in and outside of class.

Week Six: Performances

The performances will be done for the class and/or other audiences, depending on what the students are willing to share.

Annotated Bibliography

Elbow, Peter, ed. *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*. Mahway, NJ: Hermagoras Press, 1994.

An excellent source book for ideas about voice in literature, containing major statements by a range of teachers and theorists. The introduction provides a useful overview of the subject.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

Contains interesting analyses of voice and the idea of double voicings in African-American writing.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.

A general-interest discussion of the feminine voice (used metaphorically and non-metaphorically).

Kerby, Anthony Paul. *Narrative and the Self*. Indiana University Press, 1991.

This book is about the relationship between language and the person. It speaks to various ways in which narrative relates to the self.

Koch, Kenneth. *I Never Told Anybody: Teaching Poetry Writing to Old People*. Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1997.

This book chronicles Kenneth Koch's time teaching senior citizens poetry. These seniors were, in most cases, unable to write their own words and had no prior relationship with poetry. Through many creative exercises, Koch and the seniors create beautiful music together on various subjects.

Noppe-Brandon, Gail. *Find Your Voice: A Methodology for Enhancing Literacy Through Re-Writing and Re-Acting*. Heineman, 2004.

An outline of methods to help students communicate better with audiences. It can be used by teachers of all subjects.

Osakwe, Mabel. *Poetrymate: A Guide to Poetry Teaching and Learning for Junior Secondary Schools*. Fourth Dimension, 1996.

Intended for use with middle school students, this guide to teaching poetry outlines what poetry is, how it can be created, and its uses. This book is especially appropriate for English Language Learners and elementary students.

Pinsky, Robert. *Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002.

This brief and clearly written essay aims to "consider the voice of poetry—emphasizing its literal or actual 'voice'—within the culture of American democracy, and the tensions of pluralism." It concludes that "[p]oetry's voice participates in that society and culture, but by its nature also resists them."

Statman, Mark. *Listerner in the Snow: The Practice and Teaching of Poetry*. New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 2000.

This book brings together the practice of poetry and the teaching of poetry. Conceptions of poetry are most often presented as absolutes; in showing where his ideas come from, along with giving samples of his own poems and stories, Statman is stepping out from behind the screen of poetry wisdom and showing himself as just what he is: a particular individual with his own particular and sometime idiosyncratic ideas about poetry and about life.

Wolfram, Walt and others. *Dialects in Schools and Communities*. London: Laurence Erlbaum, 1999.

Addresses the natural interest and educational concern about dialects by considering some of the major issues that confront educational practitioners.

Appendices

Appendix A - Standards

Many of the PA Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening for eighth grade will be addressed throughout the completion of this unit. The first of those is 1.2.8.C which states that students will "produce work in at least one literary genre that follows the conventions of the genre." Students will write at least five original poems during this unit. Some of these poems will follow conventions while other will be free verse.

The second standard in this unit 1.3.8.A, B and C simply instruct students to "read and understand works of literature" and "write poems." Student will become familiar with and use sound techniques and figurative language in poetry.

Standard 1.6.8.B and C states that students should "listen to selections of literature," relate it to previous knowledge, summarize events and analyze the selections. Students will also "use skills appropriate to formal speech situations" when they are performing their poetry.

Appendix B - What is Poetry?

Create phrases about poetry that employ figurative language.

Poetry is like

Writing poetry

When I read poetry, I feel like

I can find poetry in

Poetry hides in

Create three of your own.

Appendix C - Internet Poetry Workshop

Internet Poetry Workshop

1. Log on to computers:

- Username
- Password

2. List of poetry sites

- The Library of Congress Poetry 180 Web site: www.loc.gov/poetry/180
- The American Academy of Poets: www.poets.org
- The Poetry Archive: www.poetryarchive.org
- Fooling with Words: www.pbs.org/wnet/foolingwithwords
- Poems on Poems: www.tnellen.com/cybereng/poetry/index.html

3. You are required to find at least one of the following:

one sonnet

- one ballad
- one ode

4. Complete the Internet Poetry Workshop activity sheet.

5. Copy and paste five poems into Microsoft Word so they can be printed at the end of class. Make sure you have the following for each poem:

- Title/Source/Page #
- Author's name
- Poem type (ode, sonnet, ballad, free verse, etc.)
- Poetic Devices (rhyme, rhythm, figurative language, etc.)
- Poem

Poetry Workshop Activity Sheet

Title/Source/Page #	Author's Name	Poem Type	Poetic Devices	I like it because...

Appendix D - Poetry in Performance

Poetry in Performance: How to Speak Expressively

Pitch

You can change the meaning of words by letting your voice go up and down. Say these three sentences, and notice how their meanings change as your voice rises and falls according to the punctuation.

- Look at the moon.
- Look at the moon!
- Look at the moon?

Stress

Giving emphasis to different words can also change a sentence. These three sentences change in meaning when a speaker puts emphasis on different words.

- *Maria* will sing.
- Maria *will* sing.
- Maria will *sing*.

Volume

You can make an important point by speaking loudly or softly. If you have been speaking in a level tone of voice, a change in volume (louder or softer) signals to the audience that you are saying something important.

Rate

Slowing your rate of speaking will also help you make an important point. Quickening your rate occasionally will add excitement to your speech.

Gestures

An appropriate gesture, or movement, will not only make your meaning clearer, it will add a little drama to what you say. Try saying, "There's a car" as a statement, an exclamation, and a question. In each case, add a gesture. Notice that the meaning is now much clearer and stronger.

Juncture

This term refers to pauses in speech. You pause when one thought ends and another begins. Repeat the following sentences.

Robert put the dog in its pen.

Robert, put the dog in its pen.

Notes

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1. Robert Pinsky, Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry, p. 18.

2. Mabel Osakwe, *Poetrymate*, p. 3

3. Reptinted from *Elements of Literature*, p. 622

4. Peter Elbow, ed. *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*, p. xxxiii

5. Peter Elbow, ed. *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*, p. xxxiv

6. Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose and Plays,* p. 665

7. This link takes you to the poem by the original author as well a copy of the template for use in the classroom http://userpages.bright.net/~dlackey/wherefrom.pdf.