



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2009 Volume IV: The Sound of Words: An Introduction to Poetry

Listen to the Sound of My Voice: Teaching Poetry to Make Language Whole

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Introduction

Long ago and far away, when I was a first year teacher in Guyana, I had a principal who loved literature. He recited poetry in his office which was adjacent to the faculty lounge. His favorite poems were "The Second Coming" and "Mending Wall." I heard "Turning and turning in the widening gyre . . ." Just through listening to his reciting the poem, hearing the emotion in his voice and the cadence of his recitation, I learned the first stanza of the poem, and can recite it verbatim more than thirty years later. From "Mending Wall," I picked up, "Good fences make good neighbors." I realize now that listening to him reciting poetry was a powerful learning experience for me. It is remarkable that I remember that poem after such a long time and so many life changing events. My experience demonstrates the power of listening as a learning tool. In addition, the ability to remember well after so many years is something we all strive for in teaching out students.

My students are average students in an urban setting. They love their cell phones, find school work boring, forget quickly, and hate to do homework. They also love music and are addicted to their iPods. About a fourth of them write poetry. Hearing and performing poetry, more than reading it, will be a refreshing experience for them. They love rhyme and rhythm. As a matter of fact, we have a very active interpretative dance team. I just envisaged our dance team dancing to the beat of "The Weary Blues," a performance which will culminate this poetry unit.

During the three weeks of this unit, "Listen to the Sound of My Voice: Teaching Poetry to Make Language Whole," my students and I will focus on the sound of poetry and the art of listening to access its rhythm and meaning. This is an important process for my students since Robert Hass posits that "real listening, like deep play, engages us in the issues of our lives." ¹ We shall recite poetry; sing it; identify the beat of the poem; write, talk and write about it. All of these activities will be conducted using listening to the sounds of poetry as the basis because, according to Walter Ong: "Sound conveys meaning more powerfully and accurately than sight." ²

My interest in listening as a classroom activity was triggered years ago by a question raised by a colleague of mine in graduate school: "Who has the greater responsibility in a conversation, the speaker or the listener?" I had never really thought about listener responsibility, but I think it refers to extracting meaning from the aural

message. Does the speaker have to make himself or herself understood? Or does the listener have a greater responsibility in accessing the speaker's meaning. Since then, my interest in listening has lain dormant. This curriculum unit is an opportunity to address this issue because it looks at listening to poetry as a way of strengthening the neglected component of language. I have not been able to find much on listening as a pedagogical activity except "Teaching Listening" by the National Capital Language Resource Center which states:

By raising students' awareness of listening as a skill that requires active engagement, and by explicitly teaching listening strategies, instructors help their students develop both the ability and the confidence to handle communication situations they may encounter beyond the classroom. ³

I plan to focus on listening as an active process that is intrinsic to understanding poetry because "the spoken word does have more power than the written word to do what the word is meant to do, to communicate." ⁴ Listening as an active process underscores the importance of listening not only in language arts, but throughout the curriculum.

Background

I teach American Literature at DeKalb Early College Academy. Our students are with us for two years, ninth and tenth grades; they are on an accelerated curriculum; our enrollment should never exceed 200 students; students are exposed to one semester of English Language Arts in the tenth grade; they take the college placement test (COMPASS) at the end of the tenth grade.

I have basically two types of students: above average students, many of whom do just enough to get by; and below average students whom we are mandated to admit because some of our students should be at the 45% in the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITSB).

We are on block schedule: four ninety-minute classes every day for 18 weeks. In their first year, they do ninth grade work in the first semester, and tenth grade work in the second semester. In their second year, they do eleventh grade work, American Literature, in the first semester or second semester because they do only one semester of language arts in the tenth grade and I am the only language arts teacher for this grade. The students are rotated, so I teach half of them the first semester and the other half the second semester. At the end of tenth grade, they do the college placement test, COMPASS. This means that I teach American Literature, an eleventh grade course, to tenth graders. In addition, American Literature culminates with an EOCT (End of Course Test) that is the final exam for the course and counts as 15% of the final grade. Because of the acceleration "issue," I have to incorporate writing instruction preparation, COMPASS preparation, and Georgia High School Graduation Writing Test practice in the one semester that I have them.

Because of all the things I am supposed to accomplish in one semester, I see my participation in this seminar as a blessing. It has inspired me to teach poetry, a segment of the American Literature curriculum, in a way that would strengthen students' listening skills; that would enable them to find the joy of language through poetry; that would strengthen their writing, reading and speaking skills; that would tap into their prior knowledge of rhyme and rhythm; that would provide a more interactive and less threatening way of learning for them. The need for the latter is magnified as we try to engage our students using the full range of media

available to us. The traditional mode of delivery of instruction can be safely seen as an anachronism, suitable for the Industrial Revolution and the factory system. Students have to be engaged through more creative and arresting pedagogy; we need twenty-first century pedagogy for our twenty-first century students. This century is called the age of technology which, according to Ong, "is the age of convention and conference and discussion group, and of the oral brainstorming session." ⁵ These are all activities that listening to poetry will support.

I can devote three weeks to a unit on poetry, and reinforce the skills learned during the three weeks throughout the semester. This curriculum unit will begin in the third week of September and end after the first week of October. The unit will be embedded within all three of my American Literature classes that will average 15-18 students each. The textbook for this class is *Prentice Hall Literature: the American Experience* by Kate Kinsella et al. ⁶ The majority of the poems studied will not be from this text; however, I will provide copies of nursery rhymes and selected poems: Robert Frost "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening," "Mending Wall," and "The Road Not Taken"; Langston Hughes "Harlem," "Ultimatum: Kid to Kid," "The Lament of a Vanquished Beau," "Mother to Son," "Words Last So Long"; Claude McKay, "If We Must Die"; Walt Whitman Selected excerpts from *Leaves of Grass*. These materials will be further supplemented by audio recordings of poems and selected musical pieces.

Rationale

Why Poetry?

This summer seminar, "The Sound of Words: An Introduction to Poetry," has provided a shot in the arm for me and boosted my resolve to focus on listening by reminding me of the magical power of the spoken word and the immediacy of sound in our lives. I am now sure that poetry is a powerful way of enhancing the language of all students because poetry is a part of each individual's "struggle out of infancy and into speech." It is both "a passage into individuation and a bridge into community." ⁷

Poetry is a genre that most students already enjoy, but fail to recognize their involvement with. All of my students love music and do so, in many cases, because of the lyrics. And of course it's not just the lyrics they love, but the singing of them, their sound. They memorize the lyrics. Once I get my students to understand that the lyrics are poems set to music, they will be more prepared to expend the effort necessary to interact with the poem and to discover the beauty of it. Many students have already written poems on their own volition, but they are shy about sharing their words and work.

English teachers speak of the four components of language (speaking, reading, writing and listening), but we have no way of knowing when students are listening effectively, and we have no proven methods of improving students' listening skills. The title of this seminar triggers in my mind pictures of students involved in the performance of poetry: reading, reciting, listening, rereading, memorizing, responding and writing. By focusing on the sounds of poetry, students have exciting opportunities to hone their listening skills, in addition to finding their voices.

Poetry can help develop listening skills. Listening is also the predominant mode through which students receive as much as "90% of their in-school information." ⁸ In addition, listening is an active process because

students create an aural text by tapping into their own background, their linguistic knowledge, and information from the message. Similarly, students create a poetic text that they may understand by tapping into their own culture, their linguistic knowledge, and information in the poem. Since creating an aural text and reading a poem dovetail so nicely, and since listening is neglected as a researched pedagogical process, I would suggest that poetry is a powerful tool for teaching listening skills that can be used across the curriculum.

Poetry is the most original form of language. It is part of our psyche because from the very beginning, recitation and performance were the bases of orality through which we transmit culture, language and spirituality. Poetry and poetic language are the bases of chant, religious ritual, cognition (mnemonic devices), and basic (the simplest form of communication) and transcendental (forms of communication involving altered states, trance, and religiosity) communication. Poetry is expressed through sound, an intrinsic part of which is motion because sound travels. As a matter fact, Langdon Hammer described poetry as a way to get at the sound of communication individually and generally. ⁹ Hass suggests that we are pattern-discerning animals as we listen to sound, and that we begin to hear rhythm and to notice patterns of repetition. He describes our attention to rhythm as almost instinctive, and rhythmic repetition as moving towards magic. ¹⁰ For these reasons, I would venture to say that poetry is much more accessible than prose. Poetry also involves the condensation of language and is generally shorter than prose. Because the language is so condensed, students usually learn more about the intricacies of language.

In the American Literature syllabus, poets and poetry are present from the early period to the present. Teaching poetry in class can be regarded as a segue into teaching our students about language, about the power of words, about the beauty and complexity of poetry, about the accessibility of poetry, about diversity, about the importance of developing a voice, about their culture and its contribution to American Society, about role models, and about listening carefully and hearing the rhythms and nuances of language.

Focusing on the sound of words establishes a connection between poetry and music, an enriching component of the academic environment. Students love music and we can use this love of music to create more student-friendly and stimulating classrooms. Adolescents seem to be increasingly focused on the spoken word; rap and hip hop and poetry can make a connection to these forms of music. Last, but not least, focusing on the sounds of words makes it easier for students to become writers themselves. As writers, they learn not only to appreciate the intricacies of language and to use it more skillfully, but also to find a voice and identity.

Why These Poets?

I have selected four poets for my unit: Robert Frost, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and Walt Whitman. I selected these poets because I believe that what they say has significance for my students. Their poetry also falls into different categories: Hughes wrote innovative poetry, very often with blues rhythms; McKay wrote the popular sonnet used in this unit; Frost wrote poetry mimicking the cadence of speech and very often blank verse; and Whitman wrote ingenious free verse. By using these poets' very different styles, I will be enabling students to experience greater diversity in how poets put together words, sounds and rhythm to relay their messages. Students will be required to memorize one of the texts we have studied for each poet. Memorization helps them focus on the sounds and meanings of the words, and gives them a sense of achievement, thereby enhancing their self-esteem. Memorization is also important because it is an indication of mastery.¹¹ Students will recite their poems to the class on specified days, and will compete for the Bard of the Week prize.

The work of these poets is accessible to students. I focused on poems by Hughes because of the cadence and blues rhythm of his poetry. I selected poems that have themes that would engage students. "Harlem" is a popular and well known poem that raises issues of keeping dreams alive, tying in very nicely with MLK's speech, "I Have a Dream." "Ultimatum: Kid to Kid" and "The Lament of a Vanquished Beau" Is age-appropriate for this population of kids. "To Make Words Sing" is just four lines long and has innumerable possibilities for teaching and activities. It also echoes the title of this unit to some extent. The last of Hughes' poems that we will study, "Mother to Son," is a beautiful, rhythmic poem that deals with a poignant topic. We can study this poem and write a title reversal poem of two stanzas: "Daughter to Mother" or "Son to Mother." Most of the students have had exposure to this poem. Doing it as part of this unit, should help them to focus better on the sound and meaning of the poem and assist them in making a shadow poem.

Claude McKay's sonnet, "If We Must Die," is an excellent sonnet for listening activities. His diction and rhythm make the emotions of his poem easy to hear. Students will research the background for this poem to give them an appreciation of how powerful it is, and how timely its message was for its audience. They will read this poem individually and in chorus to hear the emotion of the poem. Once we have read the poem and identified and analyzed the poetic devices employed by McKay to give it its power, they will do the exercise where they change the title to make it opposite and write a poem appropriate for the title.

Students will study three of Frost's poems. Most of them have already read "The Road Not Taken." They will listen to an audio recording of the poem read first by Frost, then by the teacher. They will discuss the differences in meaning based on the sounds of the two readings. They will read the poems "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening," and "Mending Wall." They will be introduced to blank verse. They will read the poems several times paying close attention to sound and meaning. In order to access the sound, students will learn about stressed and unstressed syllables and scan the poems. They will fully analyze the poems. They will compare these poems with natural speech to see if his "poetry is a reproduction of the tones of natural speech." ¹² These poems should all be engaging for students because they appear simple but have a complex message.

The last poet we will study is Walt Whitman. We will work with five excerpts from his "Song of Myself." We shall do the first stanza of the poem; the second excerpt is Stanza 6 and begins with "A child said" and ends with "And here are the mother's laps"; the third excerpt is Stanza 7 and begins with "And has anyone supposed it lucky to be born" and ends with "The earth good, and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good"; the fourth excerpt is from Stanza 10 (the last ten lines) begins with "The runaway slave came by my house and stopped outside," and ends with "I had him sit next to me at the table"; the fifth excerpt is stanza 16 of the poem that begins with "I am of the old and young" and ends with "Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips." Although taken from the same poem, these excerpts differ in theme, emotion, speed, tone, and mood. The excerpts will be closely examined for these topics. Students will examine the excerpts for the devices Whitman uses to achieve diversity in his style within the same poem, and to infuse internal rhyme and rhythm in his poems. Students will write lines of poetry imitating Whitman's style.

Objectives

By the end of this unit, students should be able to read any of the poems studied aloud, understand the poem, and paraphrase and analyze it.

They should be able to see how different renditions, using stress or role playing, of the poem may alter the meaning, the tone or the mood. They should be able to specify the ways in which the alteration takes place.

They should be able to read any poem, written in Modern English, that they encounter fluently and aloud. They should be able to identify the theme and show some appreciation of the devices the poet uses.

Students should be able to differentiate between rhyming poetry, blank verse and free verse. They should also be able to write the rhyming pattern if there is one and to identify stressed and unstressed syllables.

They should be able to research a poet's background and show how it has affected his work or how references to his culture and background appear in his poetry.

They should be able to identify the poetic techniques and show how they were used by the author to enrich the poem. Such contrivances will include sound mechanisms like alliteration, onomatopoeia, and repetition; in addition to, other poetic devices like symbolism, personification, and irony.

They should be able to read a poem and write an analysis of it, using a rubric provided by the teacher. The final aim is for students to compose their own rubrics.

They will write different forms of poems such as acrostic poems, or epitaphs, using rubrics provided by the teacher. "In acrostic poems, the first letters are aligned vertically to form a word" that is often the subject of the poem. ¹³

Students will decide which word they will use for the subject of their poem, and write their poems. After looking at some of the famous epitaphs, students will write their own. They will share with the class, and display these in Writers' Corner.

Strategies

The strategies in this unit will be based on the six Common Instructional Strategies of Early Colleges: Classroom Talk, Collaborative Group Work, Literacy Circles, Questioning, Scaffolding, and Writing to Learn. These will buttress the four components of language: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. My responsibility is therefore to incorporate activities for each of the components of language using these stipulated strategies. As the title of my unit suggests, listening activities will be the primary focus, but they will by no means preclude activities to support the other components.

Class Room Talk

Classroom Talk describes the types of interactions that generate speaking, listening, reading aloud; rereading;

responding orally to reading; listening to recordings; making recordings; asking/answering questions and providing aural feedback to messages, poems, and so on. This strategy will be an intrinsic part of developing listening and memorization skills in students. They will memorize poems every week and compete for the Bard of the Week prize. They will listen as others talk and they will respond: Listening to poems read aloud and analyzing poetry in the whole group are all parts of classroom talk. In this unit, every selected poem will be read out loud several times so that students will create aural texts through careful listening. They will then share their texts with others and evaluate their responses. Students will also be listening to recordings and making recordings; they will play with different types of recordings, such as solo and choral recordings. They will decide which type of recordings are the most effective. Classroom talk also includes think-aloud by students and teacher, students' spontaneous contributions and suggestions to make the subject more engaging for them.

Collaborative Group Work

Collaborative Group Work is when students work in groups of two or more on a common goal. It helps to generate a friendlier learning environment because students can speak with their peers directly, have opportunities to share and manipulate information, and work with different partners during the course of a semester or even a day. When students answer questions in groups, they do not feel as vulnerable. Collaborative group work also affords students opportunities to exchange ideas, experience new perspectives, realize that people can have different opinions and work together in harmony. Sometimes students will be assigned to dyads or triads to identify sound devices, to scan lines, to write and share response journals. They become more spontaneous and hence participate more. In addition, by focusing on their listening skills, they learn good socialization and leadership skills working in collaborative groups.

In their groups, students will learn to negotiate and to compromise. It is unlikely that all students within a group will have identical interpretations of a poem. They will learn to work together to present a project that everyone has bought into.

Literacy Circles

Literacy Circles stimulate intense aural communication among students and differ from collaborative groups in the assignment of specific roles to each group member. The roles assigned will depend on the discipline and the purpose of the assignment. Examples of roles for a poetry class can be: coordinator, reader, wordsmith, and researcher. Each of these roles should be modeled so that students are very clear about their roles, and can make better choices about the roles they will play. Literacy Circles are much more structured and students should know exactly what they are expected to do. In this format, students usually have major assignments that extend over several weeks and culminate in a project or presentation. This strategy is also useful for helping students to listen to, and to communicate with their peers. Sometimes teachers may use the two strategies simultaneously. For instance, students may belong to a literacy circle for a major assignment, but the teacher can put pairs of students together in collaborative groups to read and memorize a poem.

Literacy circles can be used when students research Langston Hughes' life and relate it to the poem, "Mother to Son." The researcher will do the research. The coordinator will make sure that each member of the group has the resources he/she needs. The coordinator also makes sure that every group member is on task and that every segment of the assignment is submitted in a timely manner. The wordsmith will go over the poem with a fine tooth comb paying attention to diction, identifying the meanings and the etymology of words occurring in the poem being studied. The reader reads aloud any poem and edits the text prepared for presentation,

Questioning

This is a very useful strategy that utilizes listening and speaking to a great extent. By using this strategy, students learn what questions they should ask to get the assistance they need. They learn to use open-ended questions and how to answer them. This strategy also helps the teacher because she has to learn the type of questions she should ask to stimulate critical thinking and performance at the higher levels of Blooms' Taxonomy. Rather than focus on What? When? or Where? I will focus on the How? and Why? I would have to train students how to ask the correct questions. There are actually question grids to facilitate this.

Scaffolding

This involves starting exercises at a comfortable level for students then increasing the rigor once students have mastered a skill. For example, while learning to scan one of Frost's assigned poems, students will first identify the stress in common words: father, mother, angry, hungry, home, come, meanwhile, sometime and so on. This first assignment will be done as a whole class group. Working in pairs, students will scan another list of common words. Once the groups have completed the list, they will share their responses with the whole group and, using the pronunciation guidelines of a dictionary, make the necessary corrections. Students will next scan their complete names deciding if their names are iambic or trochaic. After discussing and sharing what they found out about their names, students will scan the first five lines of "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening." The several stages described above, illustrate one way in which scaffolding will be used in the unit.

Writing to Learn

This strategy provides opportunities to do shorter forms of writing to establish clarity, to demonstrate understanding, to write response journals, to gain practice in writing, to write notes, to use writing as a way of thinking, to treat writing as the essential language component it is. Writing to learn is a very useful strategy across the curriculum and may help to dispel students' writing anxiety. The possibilities are limitless: students can write short answers, evaluative journals, letters, short poems, poetic lines, and definitions.

In this unit, students will write responses to poems after listening to them being read, and they will write evaluations of poems they record. After critiquing their recordings, they will record again incorporating the suggested improvements. They will identify different poetic devices, such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, and rhyming couplets; short poems; and altered lines of selected poetry by listening first and writing later.

Activities

The First Activity for the Poetry Class

On the first day of the unit on poetry, I shall introduce poetry by having students define poetry and determine what makes poetry different from prose based on their prior knowledge and linguistic experience. Student responses will be written down and then checked by whole group for completeness. For example, "Was anything about poetry left out?" We shall read aloud and listen to Langston Hughes' "The South." I shall ask students to say what they noticed about the poem. We shall have a discussion of the techniques the students identify. I will provide definitions for each of the following terms: end rhyme; stress and meter; internal rhyme:

alliteration, consonance, assonance; onomatopoeia; and caesura. Once students are comfortable with these terms, they will work in pairs to identify them in nursery rhymes provided by the teacher. Students will identify the effects the different devices have on the tone, voice and content of the poems examined. These activities fall under Classroom Talk, Questioning, and Collaborative Group Work and Scaffolding.

Ritual for Reading a Poem in Class

Each time the class and I read a poem for the first time in class, we will perform the same ritual. If I have a recording of the poem, I will play it for the students to listen. I will then reread the poem deliberately for the students to hear the rhythm. If I do not have a recording, I will do the first reading aloud of the poem, and two students will read after me. Student who read will be volunteers. So each poem will be read aloud three times. After the poem has been read aloud three times, I will ask students to comment on the poem, making sure that they indicate if they like the way it sounds, or if they reacted to any particular lines. The class and I will discuss the poem based first upon its sound and student reactions to it. Students will check any unfamiliar words in their dictionaries, and make a note of them. They will next identify end rhyme, internal rhyme, alliteration, personification, etc. They will also paraphrase at least two stanzas of the poem. The strategies employed here are Classroom

Talk, Questioning and Writing to Learn.

Practicing Alliteration and Other Devices

Students will be asked to write two lines of alliterative verse using their first letter of their first name for the alliteration in the first part of each line, and the initial letter of their last name for the second part of the two lines. For example, Maxine Sample will yield: "Many months ago, she shockingly suggested/That Mary and my mother should support her and her sick son." Students will read what they have written aloud for them to listen. Class mates will be allowed to make suggestions on how each of the samples can be improved. There will be variations in this activity. Sometimes, students will pick a note card with an event and the letter they are to use out of a brown paper bag. Students will be asked to write lines, or mini poems, using other poetic devices such as onomatopoeia, or end rhyme. Students will first read their texts, and receive aural feedback before displaying them on the bulletin board. The strategies associated with this activity are Classroom Talk, Questioning, Scaffolding, Writing to Learn, and Collaborative Group Work.

Rewriting Lines of a Poem to Change the Mood or Tone

Working in pairs, students will be asked to change the diction of the stanza of a poem in order to change the mood or tone. They will also be asked to speed up the pace of the poem or to slow it down by employing long or short words. Another technique is rearranging the lines of a poem or truncating lines to see how the meaning is affected. The first five lines of Walt Whitman's poem, "Song of Myself," is a good illustration of this: "I celebrate myself,/ And what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you./ I loafe and invite my soul,/ I lean and loafe at my ease . . . observing a spear of summer grass." TO: "I celebrate myself,/ And what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you./ I lean and loafe at my ease . . . " TO: "I celebrate myself, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you./ And what I assume you shall assume,/ I lean and loafe at my ease . . . observing a spear of summer grass." Students will share with class their alterations of the poem. Students will share their work by reading aloud and receiving aural feedback from their peers. The strategies associated with this activity are Classroom Talk, Scaffolding, Writing to Learn, and Collaborative Group Work.

Changing the Stress in Poems to Alter the Meaning

Working in pairs, students will read the same poem with the stressed changed to alter the meaning. A twist on this is for students to read the poems assuming the personae of different people. For example, a student can read a poem as a father, as an infant, as a judge, while another reads as another character. The changes in personae will affect the stress in the poem. A judge will make a more deliberate, slow and authoritative rendition that will slow down the speed and place greater emphasis on the stressed syllables. An infant will read more quickly and in a more sing-song manner. Students listening to different renditions of the same poem should be able to identify differences in sound and determine if the different renditions affected the meaning of the poem. The whole group will discuss the differences in meaning they notice and write reflective journals on this exercise. The strategies associated with this activity are Classroom Talk, Scaffolding, Writing to Learn, and Collaborative Group Work.

Researching the Life and Times of a Poet

Students, working in different Literacy Circles where they will be discussing, will research the life of one poet whose work we studied in class. Students will receive their roles from the teacher: Coordinator, Wordsmith, Researcher, and Editor. They will use the biographical data to facilitate understanding of the poet's message and concerns. They will employ this information in their written analyses of the poems where appropriate. Each group will prepare a presentation for a date noted in the schedule. Students will be given a rubric with guidelines for their topic, treatment of the topic, and suggestions for an interesting presentation. The strategies associated with this activity are Classroom Talk, Questioning, Scaffolding, Writing to Learn, and Literacy Circles.

Responding to a Specific Poem by Changing the Theme

I will provide students with copies of the poem, "If We Must Die," by Claude McKay. Students will read the poem aloud and perform it; finally, they will discuss McKay's meaning, and point out how the devices he used affect the emotions of his poem. The next day, they will write their own response poem, "If We Must Live." They will share their poems with the whole group that will provide them with constructive feedback. The strategies associated with this activity are Classroom Talk, Questioning, Scaffolding, Writing to Learn, and Collaborative Group work.

Counting Stressed Syllables in Lines of Poetry

Before students actually identify the stressed syllables in lines of poetry, they will take polysyllabic words and stress them according to my direction. For example, they will pronounce PILLOW as PILLOW first and pillow after. The uppercase letters signify the stressed syllable. They will do the same with their names and addresses. Once they are comfortable with the procedure, the class as a whole will scan "Mending Wall" syllable by syllable. The strategies associated with this activity are Classroom Talk, Questioning, Scaffolding, Writing to Learn, and Collaborative Group work.

Providing Parallel Songs for Selected Poems

Students will select one of the poems provided by me and for homework, will find a song that, for them, best reflects the spirit of the poem. On the next day, students will share their songs they have linked to the poems and briefly explain the parallels they see. The strategies associated with this activity are Classroom Talk, Questioning, Scaffolding, and Writing to Learn.

Lesson One: Understanding What Is Poetry

The first day of the unit will be devoted to having students define poetry and decide which of two written excerpts is poetry. I will ask the questions: What is a poem? How do you know that a piece of writing is a poem and not prose? Students will be given ten minutes to think about their responses and write them down. They will read their responses and, as they do, the teacher will ask thought provoking questions. For instance, if a student says, "Poems rhyme." I will retort, "Aren't there poems that do not rhyme?" When we have discussed the topic, each student will write a revised definition. I will next give students the following two excerpts written in lines for them to decide which one is prose and which poetry.

Excerpt A

I was in high school Before I discovered James Weldon Johnson's Collection of African American Negro Poetry It had never been checked Out of the library. ¹⁴

Excerpt B

Nothing is as beautiful as spring When weeds in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush Thrush's eggs look like little low heavens and thrush Through the echoing timber does so rinse and ring The ear, it strikes like lightning to hear him sing;
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Students will study the two excerpts for five minutes; then I will read both excerpts aloud. Using my model, students will recite the excerpts to their partners. I will read the excerpts aloud a second time. They will then make their choices. They will be divided into two groups, A and B. The two groups will debate each other. Each side will support its answer by using data from its selection to justify its answer.

As students justify their choices, I will begin writing poetic devices on the board: end rhyme, alliteration and so on. I will ask the whole group to vote on its choice, and will verify that B is the poem. I will read B for the third time and ask students to write down any words they recognize. Whole group will discuss the words they copied down and the meanings of such words.

After reading the poem together, the students and I will paraphrase the stanza of the poem and discuss the author's tone and meaning. Three student volunteers will read B while class listens. At the end of the readings, class will pinpoint differences in sound and meaning they heard in the renditions of the stanza.

I will play an audio recording of "Harlem" as students listen. At the end of the recording, two student volunteers will read the poem as their peers listen. I will encourage students to share any information they have about the poem and about the author. I expect that some students will have prior knowledge of the poem and its author. For home work, students will research background material on Hughes in order to better understand the context in which the poem was written.

Lessons 2 and 3: "If We Must Die" by Claude McKay

Lesson 2

Students will read McKay's sonnet aloud. They will listen to the first reading. They will listen to the second reading and write down what they hear.

"If We Must Die" by Claude McKay
If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blow deal one death
blow! What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous,
cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

I will identify the poem as a sonnet and ask class if anyone knows what a sonnet is. I will define a sonnet, a 14 line poem, with a specific rhyming pattern. Class volunteers will identify the rhyming pattern of the poem and whole class will write it down. I will share some of the characteristics with class. Students will listen to a third reading by the teacher and this time will focus on the emotion they hear in the poem. The class and I will identify the different types of emotions in the sonnet and the words McKay uses to convey these emotions. Students will support their responses by reference to the text. For example, if they identify the emotion of anger, they can refer to the first three lines of the poem: "Let it not be like hogs," "penned in an inglorious spot" and "While around us bark the mad and hungry dogs." If they identify the emotion as inspirational, they will direct the class' attention to the relevant section of the poem.

Students will research the context in which the poem was written, the 1919 race riots. These riots took place in Chicago, Illinois, from July 27 through August 2, 1919. The riots were precipitated by White gangs attacking Blacks neighborhoods. The drive by shooting emerged as a new phenomenon and by the end of the violence, 38 people were dead, 537 injured, and 1000 made homeless. When Blacks tried to defend themselves by fighting back, they were mercilessly attacked by the police, who ignored the violent behavior of the White gangs.

Armed with this information, teacher and class will analyze the poem. Students will write a response journal on the techniques McKay uses to connect with his reader.

Lesson 3

I will ask class to define optimism and pessimism. Once students are clear about the differences in meaning, I will ask them if they think either term applies to the sonnet they read the previous day. The class and I will discuss the relevance of McKay's poem in the year 2009: Do we still need to fight? How do we fight?

I will introduce the title, "If We Must Live." The whole class will discuss how this can possibly be achieved by changing the diction, using happier words, changing the beat, using softer sounds and more appealing imagery, slowing down the pace by using longer words. I will distribute my version of stanza one of "If We Must Live" for the class to study and use as a model..

"If We Must Live" If we must live, then let it be like babes Celebrated and dined in each and every way While round us surge the paparazzi knaves Doing their best to desecrate our day

Working in dyads or triads, students will write their versions of "If We Must Live." They will share their poems with the class, discussing the reasons for the choices they made. They and class will pay particular attention to what they hear in each poem as they listen to it being read by the authors. In addition, they will identify the words that triggered a particular emotion in them. They will provide feedback in a non-threatening manner. Students will publish their poems in Poets' Corner, the publication section of the poetry unit.

APPENDIX

Georgia Standards for the Unit

ELA11LSV1: The student participates in student to teacher, student to student, and group verbal interactions.

ELA11LSV2: The student formulates reasoned judgments about the written and oral communication in various media genres. The reader delivers focused, coherent, and polished presentations in various genres that convey a clear and distinct perspective, demonstrate solid reasoning, and combine traditional rhetorical strategies of narration, exposition and description.

ELAALRL1: The student demonstrates comprehension by identifying evidence in a variety of texts representative of different genres and using the evidence as the basis of interpretation.

Sample Task for ELAALRL 1(also ELAALRL5)

The student focuses on one American poet and creates a project board or a multimedia presentation that illustrates the understanding of the topic.

ELAALRL2: The student identifies, analyzes and applies knowledge of theme in a work of American Literature and provides evidence from the work to support understanding.

ELAALRL3: The student employs a variety of writing genres to demonstrate a comprehensive grasp of significant ideas in selected literary works. The student composes essays, narratives, poems, or technical documents.

ELAALRL5: The student understands and acquires new vocabulary and uses it correctly in reading and writing.

ELAA11W2: The student composes an essay that states, explains, and justifies the writer's interpretation of a literary work, using only evidence from the primary text as support (e.g. characterization, setting, diction, point of view, structure, figurative language, imagery, tone, etc.).

Annotated Teacher Bibliography

Burnshaw, Stanley. *Robert Frost Himself*. New York: Brazellier, 1989.

A poet himself, Burnshaw has written a book on Frost that pays tribute to his genius while, at the same time, accommodating his idiosyncrasies and recognizing the tragic nature of his personal life. He paints a clear picture of the tortured genius that emanated from Frost's unique combination of mental acuity, personal angst and dysfunctional relationships.

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

Elbow puts together group of essays on voice and writing that offer diversity and depth from a range of writers. His thorough introduction is the glue that holds the essays together.

Frost, Robert. "The Imagining Ear," in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays*. New York: Library of Congress, 1995.

In this somewhat amusing piece, Frost shows how he went from being clueless about producing the right tone to masterful in finding the right expressions for his thoughts.

-. *The Voice of Robert Frost: Read by the Author*. USA: Random House Inc., 2003.

This source is a CD of Frost's poems read by him, and contains his most famous poems including the three selected for this unit.

Gentile, J. Ronald and James P. Lalley. *Standards and Mastery Learning: Aligning Teaching and Assessment So All Children Can Learn*. CA: Corwin Press, Inc., 2003.

Gentile and Lalley identify obstacles to mastery learning and outline some of the ways these can be removed for the necessary alignment between mastery learning and standards to take place.

Hass, Robert. "Listening and Making." *Twentieth Century Pleasures*. New York: Ecco, 1984.

Hass very thoroughly and convincingly shows how rhythm and the change of rhythm are not superficial devices, but mechanisms that penetrate to the depths of our being.

Hartman, Charles O. *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980.

In this well written article on prosody and its elements, Hartman identifies five elements of prosodic organization. He discusses each in detail to help readers understand some of the characteristics of free verse. He states that "in each poetic tradition, one or two elements are likely to dominate and determine the conventional prosody" (16).

Hirsch, Edward. *How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry*. USA: Harvest Book, 1999.

Hirsch, an aficionado of poetry, shares his love of the genre with his reader. He goes into the intricacies of poetry making offers tips for not only the aspiring poet, but for the student and teacher of poetry.

Hooks, Bell. "'When I Was a Young Soldier for the Revolution': Coming to Voice," in *Landmark Essays on Writing and Voice*.

Hooks describes her experiences as a student discovering African American poetry and experiencing the "pure enchantment" of learning by listening and reciting.

Hughes, Langston. "Children and Poetry" and "The Fun of Being Black," in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Vol. 9*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002.

In "Children and Poetry," Hughes observes that children are more open to poetry than adults. He also posits that poetry helps people to remember. He describes the circumstances under which he wrote several poems. In "The Fun of Being Black," he attributes mankind's best performances to existing conflict within the society. This explains the title of his essay: racial conflict generates enjoyment for the underdogs.

McKay, Claude. *A Long Way from Home*. USA: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1970.

In this autobiography, McKay incorporated much of his poetry, thus providing a context for much of his work. He also described his surprise to the enthusiasm with which his sonnet was received.

McKeague, Patricia. *Step by Step: Writing About Literature*. Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Co., 2007.

This book is an outstanding resource for both students and teachers. McKeague focuses on literary analysis using literary elements and activities and providing specific examples and models of literary analysis. Her section on poetry, like all the other sections of this book, is very well done.

Ong, Walter. "Word as Sound," in *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*. Peter Elbow, ed. Mahwah, NJ: Hermagoras Press, 1994.

Ong argues that spoken words have much more power than written words. Consequently, we communicate much more effectively when we use sound. He article is very scholarly and culminates with Ong's contrasting the psychoses of sound oriented and sight oriented cultures.

Pinsky, Robert. *The sounds of Poetry: a Brief Guide*. NY: FSG, 1998.

The chapter on "Accent and Duration" is very well done. Pinsky explains that the stress on a syllable in English is not fixed, but relative, depending on the words around it. He also helps the reader to understand the difference between accent and duration.

Poirier, Richard and Mark Richardson. *Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*. NY: Library of America, 1995.

This book is useful for finding authentic versions of Frost's three poems used in this unit: "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening," "Mending Wall," and "The Road Not Taken."

Rampersaud, Arnold. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Vintage Classics, 1999.

Rampersaud does an excellent job of organizing Hughes' immense oeuvre. He also covers every aspect of his life making this book the official reference on this very prolific writer.

Sitomer, Alan and Michael Cirelli. *Hip-Hop Poetry and the Classics*. Canada: Milk Mug Publishing, 2004.

This book is an excellent teacher resource. It has many brilliant strategies and activities for teaching poetry.

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1995.

This book provides a complete copy of the excerpts that I will use to teach Whitman's poetry. They are from "Song of Myself," Stanzas 1, 6, 7, 10 (last ten lines) and 16.

Wormser, Baron and David Cappella. *Teaching the Art of Poetry*. Mahwah: Lawrence Earlbaum Assoc. Inc., 2000.

This article explains how poets use combinations of sounds to achieve the effect they seek. Worsler uses specific poems to illustrate his argument focusing on the full range of sound devices. He refers to the "poet's ear": the ability to combine certain sounds to activate particular effects or "sound satisfactions."

Student Annotated Bibliography

Eleveld, Mark. *The Spoken Word Revolution*. IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2007.

This book of poetry is most interesting reading. Not only does it have poems, but it also has commentary on traditional (academic) poetry and slam poetry. The writings describe the divide between the two schools. It includes a CD that is very well done.

Franco, Betsy. *Things I Have to Tell You: Poems and Writing by Teenage Girls*. CA: Pacific News Service, 2002.

This book contains poems, photographs and essays. The multi media are very attractively juxtaposed. The topics are current and relevant for the average teen.

Giovanni, Nikki ed. *Hip-Hop Speaks to Children: A Celebration of Poetry with a Beat*. CA: Sourcebooks Inc., 2008.

This children's book on poetry has a mixture of hip-hop and traditional poems. It includes several popular poems from a variety sources and Martin Luther King Jr. speech, "I Have a Dream" written as a poem. The strength of this book is that it has an audio CD with some strong, rhythmic poems. There is no analysis of the poems, just the sounds and a list of the editorial personnel, of the illustrators, and of the contributors.

Gordon, Ruth ed. *Pierced by a Ray of Sun*. New York: Harper Collins, 1995.

Ruth Gordon has put together a set on poems on feeling alone, a common feeling for most of us. She is known for devoting her time to compiling poems for teens.

McKeague, Patricia. *Step by Step: Writing About Literature*. Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Co., 2007.

This book is an outstanding resource for both students and teachers. McKeague focuses on literary analysis using literary elements and activities and providing specific examples and models of literary analysis. Her section on poetry, like all the other sections of this book, is very well done.

Sitomer, Alan and Michael Cirelli. *Hip-Hop Poetry and the Classics*. Canada: Milk Mug Publishing, 2004.

Although this book is an excellent teacher source, I recommend it strongly for students because of its excellent organization and outstanding selection of poems from a wide spectrum of authors. Students should find it to be a student-friendly reference book.

Stepanek, Mattie J. *Reflections of a Peacemaker: A Portrait Through Heartsongs*. Kansas City: Andrew McNeel Publishing, 2005.

The poems in this book are written by a pre-teen who was dying of neuromuscular disease. His poetry is inspiring and touching because he was aware that his time was limited. His story was told to the world, became famous, and was on the New York Time best selling list.

Bush, Valerie Chow ed. *Believe Me, I Know: Poetry and Photography by Writer Corps Youth*. CA: Writer Corps Books, 2002.

The contributors to the poems in this book range in age from six to twenty. Contributions consist of poems and photography and should be engaging for students who are interested in writing and publishing poetry.

Notes

1 Robert Hass, "Listening and Making Meaning," 120.

2 Walter Ong, "Word as Sound," in *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*, 21.

3 National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC), "Teaching Listening," 1.

4 Walter Ong, "Word as Sound," 21.

5 Ong, *ibid.*, 23.

6 The text book is over 1370 pages. It has some useful teaching activities, but the selection of reading material is rather bland.

7 Langdon Hammer, Lecture, "Biography: Learning About Other People's Lives," July 8, 2009.

8 NCLRC. "Teaching Listening."

9 Langdon Hammer, Lecture

10 Robert Hass, "Listening and Making Meaning."

11 J. Ronald Gentile and James P. Lalley, *Standards and Mastery Learning*.

12 Robert Frost, "The Imagining Ear," in *Collected Poems, Prose and Plays*, 687.

13 Alan Sitomer and Michael Cirelli, *Hip-Hop and the Classics*, 126.

14 Bell Hooks, "'When I Was a Young Soldier for the Revolution': Coming to Voice," in *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*, 51.

15 Gerald Manley Hopkins, "Spring."

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