



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2014 Volume II: Playing with Poems: Rules, Tools, and Games

Tearing Poetry Apart: A Short History of How Collage, Concrete, and Conceptual Poems Are Made

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Introduction

"Poetry is for everyone" -Tristan Tzara ¹

In this curriculum unit you will find models and exercises for learning how to make Dadaist cut-up poems, visual typography poems, visual collage with words, redaction poems, concrete constructivist poems, and found poems, culminating in the production of an altered book. Here is an example from one student that demonstrates the potential for both artistic and literary merit:



Image by Vanessa Guzman

Deeper than any actual activities, however, is the goal of getting students to understand the conceptual framework for poetry of this type, and cultivating critical thinking skills: *How could this text be altered to find new meaning(s)? How can we find meaning and purpose in creating conceptual and concrete poetry out of found images and words?* For teachers, I suggest that using "Multiple Modalities," can enhance instruction in literacy, and make an argument for using both the verbal and the visual in this type of work: *How can art teach writing, and writing teach art, and both teach critical thinking? How can both modalities of art and literature fuse to inspire new perspectives of tone, syntax, diction, content, and artist/writer's voice?* Ultimately, students will see how the "Conceptual" work being done over a wide span of history synthesizes art, poetry, and theory, and learn how to grasp abstract ideas with concrete activities. Participants in this unit, whether located in a Poetry workshop, English class, Philosophy, or Art and Design seminar, will find themselves entering the contemporary moment in which these separate fields pursue a common thread of inquiry. Ultimately, this is a unit about how to *think*, as much as one about how to *do*. While the main focus for most poetry is original self-expression, and even romanticizes feelings, this work allows students to re-use language creatively and analytically, and detach themselves from typical experiences with narration.

Content Objectives

Overview

Too often, high school students are introduced to poetry as either a personal or an inaccessibly cerebral activity, in which some students are segregated as poets and others unfortunately become passive observers, or worse, come to be turned off from poetry entirely because of a belief that this is "Not Me". In this series of activities, designed for both the serious student of poetry and those students who find much of poetry and creative writing daunting, at best, I attempt to bridge this great divide. While I may teach poetry at the High School level, I imagine that middle and elementary school teachers, as well as university professors, can all find merit and value within this curricular framework, so long as they do not mind making some creative adaptations. Nonetheless, this unit makes room for the seemingly distant extremes to meet in new territory that allows for students to find tremendous enjoyment, freedom, and room to grow and explore to a depth anyone can find enriching.

First of all, Conceptual poetry and Concrete poetry are only different in that Conceptual poetry suggests that the idea is the point; while the poem may be executed in total, no matter how tedious or compelling the process, it is an original idea that serves to inspire more thinking. Concrete poetry, similarly, is the process of taking the poem as an object and playing with it as a physical sculpture that can be manipulated. This is why conceptual art and poetry can be seen in the same context: they are all made most simply of material that already exists. Here is an example of a short poem by William Merrick that has been manipulated in a concrete way:

Rationale

Edison High School is moving through a remarkable transition from a neighborhood comprehensive school of about 1200 students, with a supplemental program of vocational and technical education, into a hybrid vocational and technical school with the academic program oriented around the shop programs in academies where virtually everyone pursues knowledge of a trade to graduation and a series of rigorous national technical exams. The shops are as diverse as Auto Mechanics or Auto-Body Painting to Culinary Arts or Filmmaking. Despite the vocational technical program that makes up the Fareira Skills Center, there is also an increasing emphasis upon creating a college-going culture that will raise literacy levels and inspire more rigorous academics and more ambitious learning. In this context we begin the 2014-15 school year exploring poetry as both creative writing that can support academic achievement and constructive process that is akin to one of the trades.

Poetry class is a yearlong Arts and Humanities elective for students from every shop, classified with Art and Music, but it may not necessarily be selected by the students as much as assigned, because it fits into their schedule when time allows. Historically, we have been made up of an inner city population living largely well below the poverty line, in which 94% qualify for the free breakfast and lunch offered by the Federal government, and where about 70% of the students at Edison are Hispanic, blending in largely from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, plus points South, while the remaining 30% are mostly native speakers of English. As a linguistically diverse school, with students who come from homes where a number of different languages or dialects are spoken, teaching poetry can raise a variety of questions for me as a teacher, such as: who will be in my classroom? What will be their ability to speak English? At what spectrum of literacy will they enter my room? How eager will they be to write poetry? Will they be interested in or prepared for school

at all?

In my experience last year at Edison, students are looking at each Arts Elective as a "play class", not as valued as core subjects like Social Studies, Math, Science, and English, especially with an increased emphasis upon testing in other subject areas. Furthermore, their vocational shops will take the focus as the center of our academic program next year, and courses like poetry tend to fall by the wayside, relegated to second-tier status. In order to work around this paradigm of degraded value, and sabotage the attitude held by so many, I intend to approach poetry as both art project and as action or process that can be learned, improvised upon, and reinvented in new and experimental ways. In this mode, students will be introduced to tangible and hands-on activities, while at the same time exposed to more abstract concepts and theoretical knowledge. There is a basis for this approach in research, in that it develops critical thinking while managing to engage even the least interested and self-conscious students, as well as those beginning to achieve literacy at any level.

"People are not single method learners!" Indeed, while specific "blended" offerings differ...consensus continues to point to the use of multiple modalities for learning..."We are, as a species, blended learners." ²

Concept-based poetry can seem peculiar to the first time teacher (or student), but it has a long history of scholarship and represents ideas anyone can learn to comprehend and appreciate.

In Kenneth Goldsmith's words "Conceptual poetry is more interested in a *thinkership* rather than a readership...Conceptual writing is good only when the idea is good". ³ Probably no one will actually read Goldsmith's 900 page transcription of an entire Sunday edition of the New York Times into a book format, but they can think about what it means. I believe every person is capable of great ideas; in fact, I believe that the use of language to express original thinking is the key to relieving my particular students at Edison High School of their inhibitions, and by extension at every school I have taught in the past 15 years. However unoriginal he claims to be, Goldsmith has done something no one has ever done before. One reader commented that Kenny Goldsmith's work left him with the conclusion that "language, no matter how un-artful, does the heavy lifting in our lives, and has encoded the entire registry of our being." ⁴ This is a belief I hope to instill within my own students.

Such a balance between the concrete and abstract is nothing new; in fact, my point is that no matter how surprising the projects studied may seem, they are established as legitimate in the historical record of both poetry and art criticism, and can be taught quite effectively and usefully at any level (or even, I would claim, at the elementary, middle, or college levels) to facilitate the learning process. In fact, in Marjorie Perloff's words, "If the new 'Conceptual' poetry makes no claim to originality—at least not originality in the usual sense—this is not to say that *genius* isn't in play. It just takes different forms." ⁵ Furthermore, I would also claim that just as a good research paper requires students to pull from a variety of primary and secondary sources, in order to find inspiration for an explication of the work's relevance, in this unit students are able to draw upon, reference, and even borrow from other writers for the purposes and uses of language itself. In the preface to *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* by Claudia Rankine, she cites Aime Cesaire, who said "And most of all beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle..." ⁶ I don't want any bystanders in my classroom; instead I want my students to get their hands dirty making poetry, and encourage them to make as much as they can.

If we are not spectators, but instead participants, then perhaps my students' biggest stumbling block is

reluctance to even try poetry. Many are stuck watching it like TV, and don't see poetry as a part of their lives; it is completely unfamiliar territory, like walking into a dark room in which they're afraid of falling. Worse, they are afraid of having the light turned on and finding a crowd of people looking at them as they fall on their faces. According to critic and poet Michael Palmer, however:

It is a time of confounding darkness and metastasizing media imagery in our society, a time when even death and the self have been reconfigured as commodities. Yet it is precisely 'in the dark,' and alone where the poet paradoxically invokes and affirms the necessary presence of the other.

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By exploring cut-up poems and the act of physically making poems, I hope to lead students enthusiastically through a place that may seem gloriously strange, peculiar, or unfamiliar, and may even be filled with darkness, but is actually seriously fun poetry. Their work in this unit will be related to the body shop, the culinary arts shop, and any of the trades; it is hands-on work, with tools like scissors and glue and paper, and they will find in this work new processes, and new results.



Image by Patience Carter

Background

Conceptual poetry seems like a contemporary movement, with the poet laureate of the Museum of Modern Art, Kenneth Goldsmith, acting as a leader and major proponent of its tenets on the American (and even international) poetry scene. Its inspiration, however, reaches much farther back in time than just the past two decades, and yet Goldsmith seems an apt representative with whom to begin to explore this work, because he is originally an artist, who now works in the medium of words, and this is a unit about the confluence of words

and imagery.

Goldsmith has gone so far as to discuss poetry on television, in the press, online, and of course, in more tangible text, in the anthology *Against Expressionism*.⁸ However, while he may be a current star of contemporary poetry, he is by no means its only living spokesperson, or the first write conceptual poetry. It is my argument here that Conceptual Poetry as a movement encapsulates and even appropriates most earlier poetic work of the 20th century, or at least attempts to be so broad. Goldsmith himself is public in his effort to serve as the umbrella for other people's work, even other people's specific texts: his brand of conceptual writing is best illustrated by a reading of his manifesto of Conceptualism before an audience at The Poetry Foundation in Chicago, Illinois, that is simply a reading of a series of other people's blogs on conceptual poetry. Another one of his books is a typed account of every radio station's weather forecast for Metropolitan New York City, combined in one document, called *Weather*.⁹ Goldsmith seems very proud of his own work, delighted with it in fact, judging by the tone in his voice when he speaks publicly (which is often—he is a DJ on a local NYC radio station), and yet no matter how light his mood, his work should be considered seriously in the poetry world. He has received critical acclaim for his work, is able to make a living doing it (and can afford to buy fabulously colored suits at that), and has formed a virtual network of other critics and poets, most notably Marjorie Perloff, Claudia Rankine, Craig Dworkin, Charles Bernstein, Tracie Morris, Christian Bok, John Yau, and a few more, who claim Conceptual Poetry as their own moniker.

In his own words, however, Kenny Goldsmith does not write any of his own writing—it writes itself. He tells this story:

At a reading I gave recently, another writer said to me incredulously 'you didn't write a word of what you said', and I thought for a moment, and sure, in one sense in the traditional sense, he was right. But in the expanded field of appropriation, of creativity, sampling, and language management, in which we all inhabit today, he couldn't have been more wrong. Each and every word was written by me; sometimes mediated by the machine, sometimes transcribed, sometimes copied, but without my intervention, slight as it may be, these works would not have found their way into the world as literature. When retyping a book, I often stop and ask myself, if what I am really doing is writing. And as I sit there in front of the computer screen, punching keys, the answer is invariably, yes.¹⁰

Many of his peers celebrate his work as genius. So what is poetic here? Accordingly, it is his performance of reading and the consolidation of all the work in his writing that makes it authentic poetry—his emphasis upon selecting that particular piece of media in the macrocosmic sense, and in a microcosmic sphere, each word and letter. Nonetheless, his reach goes beyond just the act of copying other people's work; just listen to him yourself, here:

Anyone can understand these books. But then the real question emerges: Why? And with that, we move into conceptual territory that turns away from the object and into the realm of speculation. At that point, we could easily throw away the book and carry on with a discussion, a move that Conceptual poetry applauds. The book as a platform to leap off into thought. And this, then, is the real social space of conceptual writing: *the conversation*.¹¹

Kenneth Goldsmith and other unoriginal geniuses are good students of history, because they have seized upon the predicament of an overly textual society and encompassed it with a vast umbrella, and laid claim to it all as their own. John Cage and others in the 1960s, the German movement of the 1930s, the Polish

movement of the 1920s, Dadaists throughout the early decades of the 20th century, as far back as Romantic poet George Herbert, and even back to the foundations of Western Civilization in ancient Greece, have made a game of language in such a way. They all play with the physical text in its own right, and in doing so are playing with the idea of language and how we use it, and from a practical standpoint, how we can make things from it. Kenny Goldsmith was an artist first, a thinking artist who became a writing artist. Goldsmith says, however, "I hate imagination, I'm opposed to it"-! ¹² There is certainly a not so veiled hint at humor, but doesn't humor come fused with truth? Isn't he saying something he truly means when he teases? And this is his innovation: he is looking for an idea of writing that doesn't necessarily have to be read (*Day* is 900 pages long), as much as thought about, and considered for its philosophical implications.

Here is Kenny Goldsmith talking about his process for *Day*, the retyping of a single issue of the New York Times daily newspaper on a normal, generally inconsequential day:

Let me go into more detail about *Day*. I would take a page of the newspaper, start at the upper left hand corner and work my way through, following the articles as they were laid out on the page. If an article, for example, continued on another page, I wouldn't go there. Instead, I would finish retyping the page I was on in full before proceeding to the next one. I allowed myself no creative liberties with the text. The object of the project was to be as uncreative in the process as possible. It was one of the hardest constraints a writer can muster, particularly on a project of this scale; with every keystroke came the temptation to "fudge," "cut-and-paste," and "skew" the mundane language. But to do so would be to foil my exercise. ¹³

He goes on to say how retyping it he made "no distinction between editorial and advertising, stock quotes or classified ads", even if there was "an ad for a car, I took a magnifying glass and grabbed the text off the license plate. Between retyping and OCR'ing, I finished the book in a year." ¹⁴ While some students might imagine this work to be tedious, and by "OCR'ing" he must be referring to a variation on Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD'ing), there is some pedagogic value in copying, and in the later activities of this unit there will be a section for "Found Poem" work that can involve a similar method of borrowing from life. Here, Goldsmith explains himself and his process even further: Far from being boring, it was the most fascinating writing process I've ever experienced. It was surprisingly sensual. I was trained as a sculptor and moving the text from one place to another became as physical, and as sexy as, say, carving stone. It became this wild sort of obsession to peel the text off the page of the newspaper and force it into the fluid medium of the digital. I felt like I was taking the newspaper, giving it a good shake, and watching as the letters tumbled off the page into a big pile, transforming the static language that was glued to the page into moveable type. ¹⁵

So let's look back to John Cage, and the 1960's, to place the current work of Conceptual Poetry in context: knowing the work of great thinkers is to know what they have written, in addition to what some serious students of their work have said about it, but keep in mind some essential questions as we go. The Introduction to *The Shock of the New*, by Robert Hughes, that looks at the breadth of themes and issues in the 20th century suggests these:

How has art created images of dissent, propaganda, and political coercion? How has it defined the world of pleasure, of sensuous communion with worldly delights? How has it tried to bring about Utopia? What has been its relation to the irrational and the unconscious? How has it dealt with the inherited themes of Romanticism, the sense of the world as a theater of despair or

religious exaltation? And what changes were forced on art by the example and pressure of mass media, which displaced painting and sculpture from their old centrality as public speech? ¹⁶

If we look back to John Cage, who was a teacher as well as a composer of music happenings, he was identified with both art and writing as well. In fact, he wrote to artist Jasper Johns that writing and art went together, and that there no longer needed to be a dichotomy between the two: "The situation must be Yes-and-No, not either-or. Avoid a *polar situation*." ¹⁷ Cage was never one to step emotionally into making a work of art, a composition, or a piece of writing; instead, he stated his intentions in a wry, even Buddhist-like capitulation, on the outset filled with a bizarre sense for humor. Just look at a claim he made about himself: "I have nothing to say, and I am saying it." ¹⁸ The connection to Kenny Goldsmith's humor is exactly my point.

Poet, critic, and anthologist Jerome Rothenberg said in an interview once "Since the 1950s . . . we have been working increasingly with a performance model of the poem, for which the written versions serve as the notation of the score." ¹⁹ In this context, he sought to "redefine poetry as an expanded field of language analogous to composer John Cage's redefinition of music as an expanded field of sound." ²⁰ Author Liz Kotz continues Jerome Rothenberg's thoughts when she says:

Cage's work grappled with the deeper implications of collage strategies, implications that go far beyond the jarring effects of juxtaposed fragments of vernacular materials. In their structural openness to found and preexisting materials, collage practices consistently undermine the position of the author, and erode distinctions between writing and reading, between production and reception. ²¹

Some theorists like John Cage, similar to some poets like John Ashbery and Jackson Mac Low a little later, have been able to retrieve from a variety of sources the material they use in their own work, so it becomes to their fields what collage was and is to artists. Ashbery, in works like his poem "Europe", demands comparison with the recent work of Kenny Goldsmith with his statement, "I enjoy reading it rather than hearing it read". ²² Many poets still look to the performance of poetry like the performance of music: like music, poetry comes in many different styles, and can be performed for audiences who respond to each individual sound, but is the combination of sounds in both art forms that makes the work complete; this is like collage. Goldsmith, however, is monochromatic compared to the variety of colorful sources used by Ashbery, or similarly, the chance randomness of Mac Low's diction. According to John Shoptaw, interpreted by Liz Kotz, "Ashbery's culling, cutting, and reordering of snippets of text, typed up in his manuscript leaves capitalization, and page placement largely intact." ²³ This type of exercise will be used later in the Activities section of this curriculum unit, even though Ashbery himself dismissed the practice later in life as "'therapy,' 'an accident,' 'a transitional phase,' made up primarily of sketches and experiments,' 'sort of a throwaway when I was writing it,' 'more in the line of sketches I thought I would recycle into something more finished.'" ²⁴ Mac Low, on the other hand, for a time used to toss dice to choose which line from a selection of prewritten and pre-selected lines of poetry to place in the order in which they landed; his process was like a game of chance played by a cheater, who stacks the deck with marked cards. ²⁵

If collage by chance is a method that Jackson Mac Low used to inspire his own writing, he was also following in the footsteps of Tristan Tzara, the Dadaist who took an idea from Pablo Picasso and ran with it in the way only a Dadaist could. In his *Dada Manifesto* Tzara directs experimenters to:

Take a newspaper. Take some scissors. Choose from this paper an article the length you want to

make your poem. Cut out the article. Next, carefully cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them all in a bag. Shake gently. Next, take out each cutting one after the other. Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag. The poem will resemble you. And there you are—an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd. ²⁶

Tristan Tzara's randomness allows for a playful irresponsibility with diction, coupled with a collage of the words that is clearly due to poetic intervention and direction. While this is the concept in his conceptual poetry, Tzara's method tells us about as much about the charming sensibility of him as a poet as a collection of tealeaves left in a cup after the tea has been consumed. According to one theorist,

One of the theoretical advantages of chance structures is that they are supposed to be impersonal; they free artists from the compulsions of self-expression, and liberate their imaginations to operate in areas they would otherwise never have access to. ²⁷

As a Dadaist, Tzara was full of original ideas; however what makes him important to teaching this work is that he left very concrete methods for executing his ideas into magnificent works of art/poetry. His work was very populist by nature, in that he meant the work for virtually anyone, and this is where it becomes useful in the classroom in which I teach. Every student can do it, but some may get more from the *idea* than others, while some may get more from the concrete *actions* they will take. All students will make something they can be proud of, visually stimulating to both the eye and the imagination. Nonetheless, the egalitarianism of the process may leave kids feeling that they have lost their own stamp of individuality in the initial product, so an effort has to be made to allow for diversion and improvisation, or it may threaten to become impersonal. According to one opinion:

While this impersonality holds true to a certain extent, the traces of an artist's signature are too pervasive to be entirely denied or disguised, even in chance-generated structures. Arp's drawings, for instance, determined by the positions in which dropped scraps of paper fell to the floor, are still identifiable as Arp's work. The same is true, as Tzara suggests, in poetry. ²⁸

Tzara's collage of words was a tremendous inspiration to writer William Burroughs in the 1950s-60s, who cut up entire books of literature to tell his own masterpiece *Naked Lunch* through collage and random assemblage of the excised words, sentences, and paragraphs. Burroughs, in turn, inspired Kenneth Goldsmith, and his work (and that of John Cage) also spawned the project that became a cult classic: the altered book *A Humument*, by artist Tom Phillips. Of his book, Phillips says in his introduction:

Like most projects that end up lasting a lifetime this had its germ in idle play at what then seemed like the fringe of my activities. A liking for words plus the related influences of William Burroughs and John Cage with their use of chance had led me into casual experiments with partly obliterated texts...Now the die was cast, the dice thrown; chance had become choice and a notion grown into an idea. ²⁹

Phillips and Tzara serve to highlight an important and significant aspect of this unit's double-edged sword: art and writing fuse in the work we attempt to understand here. Textual art is simultaneously visual poetry, like two names for the same roadway. So which is it, students may ask, writing or art? In my estimation as an experienced teacher, writer, artist and thinker, while the question consumes much of my waking moments these days, both in and out of the classroom, it truly doesn't matter. What *is* crucial is that the question is

being raised, over and over again, because it can inspire an interesting discussion, and by extension, very critical thinking. Teenagers in my classroom ask themselves if they are children or adults; becoming 18 is a legal and even social benchmark, but in reality they will always be in flux; the grey area between art and literature provides dynamic territory that demands exploration, and is a metaphor for the space my students inhabit between youth and adulthood. Students should not be forced to fit into one space or the other, art or writing, youth or adult, but feel free to work in multiple mediums, exploring both as these multiple modalities allow them access to their own creative voice. Most of all, though, the activities that follow are just good old fashioned play, and play has a cherished place in the heart of every student of any age.

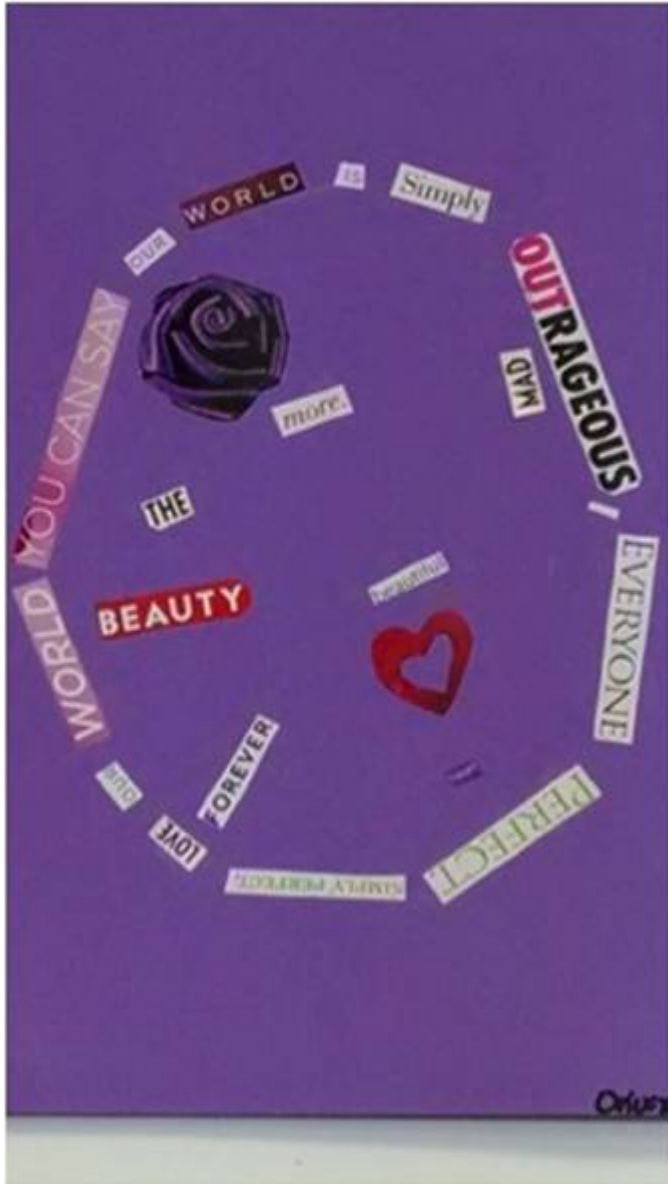


Image by Onixza J. Agosto

Strategies

Students attempting to do this type of poetry exploration, that is both concrete in the hands-on sense, and abstract in its theoretical underpinnings, need not be as prepared for this kind of work as one might think. Nonetheless, I recommend approaching it gradually using the Danielson Framework known as the 7-step lesson plan.

Warming-Up

Here, I like to capture students' eyes and imaginations simultaneously and immediately with a visual display as they enter the room. If you have done the project before, or if you can display examples from the World Wide Web on a White Board (aka a "Smart Board"), then project the images now. The idea is to begin with the end in mind, so that students can picture where they are heading in their minds, but I tend to remove the images after a few minutes so that students do not hold too tightly to what has been done previously; let their memories do a little work, and their own imaginations will take over. Here I like to probe them with questions as they take in the impact of the examples, either orally, if you can do so, or on paper, if that seems more effective to you in your own classroom setting, or both, which is what I prefer to do in my own room: I have them write their thoughts down on 3 x 5 note cards which can be easily collected or even displayed on their desks for others to see. Such a small expectation can cause little to no stress, but yields a lot of gut reactions, responses that can be drawn out and expanded upon later.

The work of collage should be delivered as a fun activity, since it can be done by elementary age students as well as anyone older; however, one strategy is to chime in with information as they work, thus reinforcing thinking about the practical application of the assignments, the ramifications of each decision, as well as the presentation and explanation of the finished product by every participant. I tend to use teaching as an aerobic activity, constantly roving the room in search of a teachable moment, an opening for inquiry, or just an opportunity to give advice, compliments, and aid. This process can leave one spinning around like a decapitated chicken if one is not careful, especially on days when all students choose to attend class and there are upwards of 33 kids in the room, so the next strategy may work better in those cases where the class is able to receive some more direct instruction, at least initially.

In any case, questions can be as simple as *"What do you see? What do you notice? How do you think the person who created this made the work happen? What do you think his/her process was? Why do you think he/she took each step in the process?"* And finally, *"Can you imagine doing something like this? What would you need to do so?"* The student responsible for the work below got the simple idea of a wine glass, but the effect of the words as sculpture really draws me in, and I want to read it as much as stand back and look at the bigger picture.



Image by unknown student

Direct Instruction

A traditional construct for any classroom, and a formal strategy, is direct instruction; this may be a necessary path for most, especially to keep everyone in order, followed by allowing for a more relaxed atmosphere as students get the feel for what they are to do in a practical sense. It would be most helpful to have directions printed out on handouts for students to begin to direct themselves once the teacher has demonstrated the actions to be taken; however, a lot of the lessons come in the final discussion, which is a necessary element to letting the deeper meanings enter into students' consciousness. This step is to show how the work will be done, and afterwards students will attempt to decipher why the work was interesting to do.

Guided Practice

Here, students of conceptual poetry will need to attempt some small exercise that practices the activity being taught, either in pairs or in groups, followed by some discussion to reveal and remediate the pitfalls of any misdirection or confusion in the process. For instance, if the students are to cut a collage of a poem from chance scatterings upon the floor, Guided Practice can be where the whole class watches as one or two

students cut up and scatter the words of the poem, gather them together and place them on a page, perhaps not even bothering to paste them down on the page into permanence. As part of this activity, the teacher as leader of the activity can probe the class for issues that might be of concern: *"How much space do you think you'll need to do this activity without getting disturbed by others? What materials will you need to collect to accomplish the steps of the activity? Where can they be found? Should you take turns? Why? Who will be your partner?"*

Alternatively, if the activity will include an entire page of crossing out ("Redaction Poetry") then begin with every student crossing out elements of a scrap of paper from a cheap piece of newspaper, before moving on to a whole article or page, or using some material that may be more expensive like a magazine or book.

Independent Practice

Here, students have already been taught to avoid any specific pitfalls to the activity, and can move ahead with executing their own projects. This may be as small as crossing out a page of paper to their satisfaction, or attempting a cut-up poem several times before pasting down a finished project onto a poster board or colored construction paper, to re-arranging the spacing of words in a poem they have already typed into a Google document, and retyping the poem into a new version, or a new shape. Independent Practice should be the most directed time for a student, but directed by the students themselves. It could be the quietest time in class, or a time for the conversations and laughter to flourish in harmony with the level of activity in the room. Most of all, students should be self-motivated at this point, and feel free to "follow your bliss" (so to say) until the project is relatively complete. Have students put away materials as part of their project, and instill the practice of helping others to do so as part of classroom routine; this permits you to spend your time preparing your comments, not playing maid.

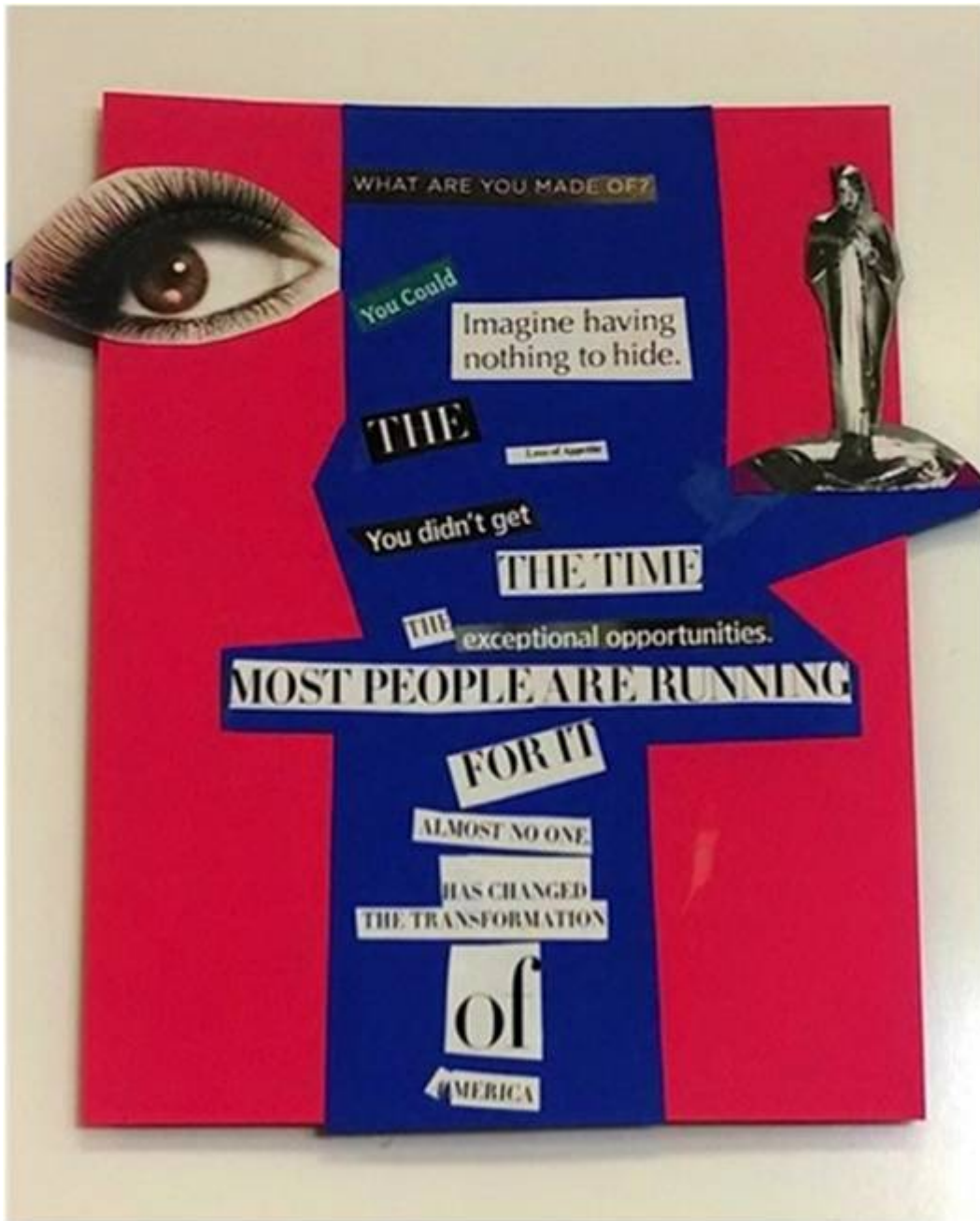


Image by Jahmiek I. Hill

Wrap Up Discussion

Now that everyone has completed their projects as best they can, it's time for some oral reflection: have them talk about what they did, and what they think of what they did. This is a crucial step to teaching that should never be neglected, because it draws out unlikely observations as well as clarifies the obvious for everyone involved. Furthermore, discussion at this point will serve to extend thinking and bring into higher order thinking through articulation the sum of the learning process. If students didn't get anything out of the activity (to their knowledge) here is where you as a teacher can turn that assumption on its head, and tease out the details until they have learned something from the process. Ask them: *"What choices did you find yourself making? Why do you think you chose to make that change in your work? What, if any, was the significance of the end result, or what were the differences between the desired outcome and what you ended up with? How*

would you do this process differently if you did it again? What do you think you have learned? All the while, a good teacher will make an effort to highlight or emphasize what the students themselves have discovered, so that everyone in the group can appreciate those same lessons.

Exit Ticket

This can often be a hurried and even overlooked activity in many classrooms, but is also essential, if not for you as the current teacher, who gets to see the benefit of quiet, reflective, summative assessment, and the opportunity to have students express some thoughts privately which may not have occurred to them to share in front of the whole class, but because it also serves to teach that writing is reflection, and is the pause that refreshes! Furthermore, settling students down again can be a challenge, and they may in fact whine at the expectation of quiet time (at any age), but it is a gift to the next teacher who wants to get them in a more orderly state of mind. Exit Tickets are more than just additional grading devices: they force students to realize that we are all writers, and thinkers, no matter what our focus in what we choose to write and think about. Here is where we come full circle and back from the concrete to the conceptual, while still putting thoughts down for others to read.

Homework

I avoid assigning homework if I can, but in many teaching scenarios it may be useful, even necessary, if not an expectation. Here you can have students read more from the thinking of other famous artists and writers who have attempted the same or similar exercises, or even assign students the challenge of making a project in the same vein at home, without the constraints of your own cheap and measly school materials! They can go hog wild at home, contrary to having felt somewhat inhibited in the classroom; they can listen to their own music while they work, rather than yours; they can experiment with new techniques, or simply finish the projects they were working on when they ran out of time. No matter what, homework can be an extension or a reinforcement of the work done in class, or even a primer for accessing new knowledge that might lead into the next activity; it can be a bridge from school to home life, so that students come to realize that there is little division between work that is assigned and work that they give themselves to voluntarily, freely, and enthusiastically. Homework should never be used as a punishment, as much as it is an opportunity for deeper recognition of the lessons you hope they will learn and come to own for themselves.

Activities

Day 1:

Remember to begin each class period or workshop with visual aids of examples of each project: each student should be able to picture where they are headed each day, such as this Google image: htmlgiant.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/09-Tzara-result.jpg (for today).

Start this unit with a Tristan Tzara Dadaist cut-up poem, using a collection of at least 25 strips of words (as large as possible) from a newspaper or magazine. Make sure you use a healthy mix of nouns, verbs, adjectives, conjunctions, etc., and depending upon the literacy level of your students, you can teach the parts of speech to them as you go ahead with the collage, as well as what a typical sentence in English should contain. I'd say start small and shoot for creating a sentence or headline-type-phrase, but it needn't make

perfect sense; a little of the illogical can be surprisingly interesting. Toss the collection of words in a container of some sort and scatter them on a desk, the floor, or a piece of paper. Space them out so they can be read (and you can do this several times until you find one that works for you, but the main point is to wind up with something you never would have created had there not been the element of *chance*. The working moral here is to "Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty", as a bumper sticker once proclaimed to me on my way home from work; teach students of this process, and moreover, to value acts of chance as serendipitous, and essential.

Have students do the same as you have demonstrated, and ultimately have them paste, glue, stick, tape down the results to a piece of paper (picking out different colors can be fun at any age!) Challenge your students to construct whole pages of "writing" using as many words and combinations of words as possible.

Day 2:

Today's class is oriented around typography; just as students had arranged the words onto a page, students here are starting to think about the big picture, as well as content. For instance, if yesterday was concerned with chance and randomness, today it is geared towards composition of those very words. Students can begin with a conventional poem they have already written, cutting out the words and rearranging them onto the page with intriguing patterns: new stanzas, dangling participles (literally), and dropped lines through enjambment. After an initial visual demonstration, set students forward focused upon remaking their old poems anew: *How can it become a different poem, even with the same words?* Furthermore, students can try to make the shape of the poem follow the subject of the poem, so that physical form mirrors content. For example, if one is writing about a swan, write about it in the shape of a swan; if it is about love, a heart; one student wrote an ode to his phone in the shape of a phone, with words forming the strings of the headphones. See some examples of "Typography" or "Concrete Poems" on Google images. Here is the address for the swan: nynkepassi.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/swan.gif. As a closing exit ticket, ask students if the act of form mirroring content is a gimmick or an important poetic act, and why? Have them pick a side and write briefly (I like to play the activity as a kind of game: "Write 25 words *exactly!*" so they have to make critical decisions about what words to leave in, and which words to leave out.)

Day 3:

So far, students in this unit have been constructing poems from an assortment of words; in this day's activity students will deconstruct a page of words in order to reveal a set of words that can be called poetry. Technically, this is a subtractive process called "redaction", and there are a lot of terrific examples in the newish book *Newspaper Blackout*, also found online by searching Google images for "newspaper blackout poems". These can begin with simply crossing out words, then advance to trying to make a sort of sense from what remains; this can become a fine art, in that students can attempt to find haiku, rhyming words, and even challenge themselves to reinvent the actual story by eliminating any words that tie to its original theme or message, while still maintaining a cohesive story. Another way this game with words on the page can be played is by having each student circle words he/she especially likes, then use markers to redact the rest. Critical decisions must be made around content, diction/word choice, and style.

Day 4:

Having broken the ice with the first three days' activities, students can begin to synthesize thinking about the work being done into a more theoretical direction, and approach the process with a set of poetic eyes. Ask students a series of probing questions: *What was your process? How is your approach unique? If a Jean Arp*

collage poem will always be unique to Jean Arp, or a redaction poem be particular to Austin Cleon, and a chance poem always bear the distinguishing choices of Tristan Tzara, do you think this work can be used to express a unique identity? Why? Why not? Read to them or better yet provide descriptions of some works by Kenneth Goldsmith to them: *How is his work unique to him?* (You can listen to an interview with him here, beginning around 21 minutes in: www.poetryfoundation.org/features/audioitem/1664.) Next, for homework, have every student look for a "found poem", or if there is time during the period, and the climate allows it, send them out into the building to find collections of words that form a type of poetry by themselves. One fellow in my formative seminar at Yale University found a poem in the construction messages of signs around the University; another fellow found a poem in an Olive Garden menu's description of their mission statement; still yet another fellow found a poem in a series of texts from a disgruntled wife, whose husband had been reticent in his husbandly duties! Have students begin to see the world as a series of random yet meaningful combinations of words in our experiences. Emphasis here is upon the act of framing some words as your own, and also framing them as *poetry*. Remember that Kenneth Goldsmith once said, "There's just decisions and no creativity".³⁰

Days 5 & 6:

Now it's time to begin combining methods to create a larger scale project: depending upon the age of your students, purchase or collect appropriate hardcover books for this stage ahead of time; magazines can serve a similar purpose, if they are of a durable variety. I like children's books, for elementary school aged kids, and any hardbound books for every other age (old school textbooks can be great, but follow your bliss!). Students may now apply layers to their work, building with collage for visual as well as verbal purposes. Let them go hog-wild! Make sure you have enough materials-scissors, glue-sticks, tape, magazines with colorful images and typefaces or the wherewithal to print out images to meet every student's wildest imagination with the means to express it artistically and poetically. This can be a long process, if you let it become one, so keep it lively, with constant celebrations of student examples to be displayed to others as models of innovation from which others might learn. Attempt at most 5-10 pages at first, gluing pages within each book together to make them more substantial and grandiose, or go whole-hog and applaud them for making an entire book a one of a kind, original work of art. I believe it is most important to have a finished project/book at the end of the unit, and ideally everyone will have tried each method at least once and had fun to boot; they may have even learned something.

Day 7

In the final day of the unit (depending upon how much time is spent upon the book project, which could be an ongoing activity) students will take time to reflect upon their work. *Is this art or is this poetry?* Students should argue a side of this issue in an essay of some sort (anywhere from a single paragraph to a 5 paragraph essay, depending upon how much you want to get into it). A few suggestions on how this can be structured: have students model their essay upon the arguments in an essay *against* Kenneth Goldsmith, here: tedhashberryman.com/2013/10/15/kenneth-goldsmith-is-a-hoax-or-fifteen-conceptual-poetry-projects-better-than-printing-the-internet/. Alternatively, they could read any number of entries at ubuweb (www.ubu.com), but in particular the beginning 3-4 paragraphs of *Moving Information: On Kenneth Goldsmith's The Weather*, by Marjorie Perloff at: www.ubu.com/papers/kg_ol_perloff.html. All these generally support the arguments put forth by Goldsmith, et al, and the contemporary thrust of Conceptual poets (as they have defined themselves by participation on this website).

Standards

This unit of study meets the Pennsylvania Common Core standards expectations for analyzing seminal texts based upon reasoning, premises, purposes, and arguments, as well as for evaluating how an author's point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text. Furthermore, it develops and strengthens writing skills through giving students the opportunity to plan, revise, edit, rewrite, or try new approaches, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. The material students will study is foundational, teaching elements of Art, History, English, Design, and even Media Studies.

CC.1.2.11-12.C

Analyze the interaction and development of a complex set of ideas, sequence of events, or specific individuals over the course of the text.

CC.1.2.11-12.H

Analyze seminal texts based upon reasoning, premises, purposes, and arguments.

CC.1.3.11-12.D

Evaluate how an author's point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CC.1.3.11-12.E

Evaluate the structure of texts including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the texts relate to each other and the whole.

CC.1.3.11-12.H

Demonstrate knowledge of foundational works of literature that reflect a variety of genres in the respective major periods of literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

CC.1.4.11-12.T

Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

CC.1.4.11-12.X

Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Bibliography

Caws, Mary Ann. *The poetry of Dada and surrealism: Aragon, Breton, Tzara, Eluard & Desnos*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970.

A very strange book, filled with reproductions of each artist's illustrative writings.

Dworkin, Craig Douglas, and Kenneth Goldsmith. *Against expression: an anthology of conceptual writing*. Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011.

This is the bible for Conceptual Writing Theory today.

Henry, Brian. *The verse book of interviews: 27 poets on language, craft & culture*. Amherst, MA: Verse Press, 2005.

This is a fascinating window into the working processes for 27 contemporary poets.

Hughes, Robert. *The Shock of the new*. New York: Knopf :, 19811980.

This is a classic book on art, art theory, and even lit theory in the 20th century.

Kleon, Austin. *Newspaper blackout*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2010.

Clever examples of redaction/subtraction poems; you can find a lot of the visuals at google images.

Phillips, Tom, and W. H. Mallock. *A humument: a treated Victorian novel*. 5th ed. New York, N.Y.: Thames & Hudson, 2012.

A fantastic visual/verbal project that demonstrates many of the methods by which textual books may be altered for artistic purposes.

Plottel, Jeanine Parisier. *Collage*. New York: New York Literary Forum, 1983.

There's a lot of un-translated French here, but otherwise good on Cubism and early Modern art.

Stambovsky, Phillip. *Philosophical conceptualization and literary art: inference, ereignis, and concept-al attunement to the work of poetic genius*. Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004.

Way over my head, but it has terrific PhD-level information on conceptual poetry.

Additional Materials for Classroom Use

Srikanth Reddy, "Voyager" = A really creative visual book of poetry.

Barbara Kruger, "Barbara Kruger" (2010) = A book of verbal art by the late 20th century artist; see her work on Google images as well.

www.chickollage.blogspot.com/p/sliced-diced-how-to-create-collage.html

= A website that teaches a variety of types of collage.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=mkq0sDX82ME = A collage poem video.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_UphwAfjhk&index=3&list=PL0Vzx4uVIR67e55N_HJVF2HL7JAvbjx4v

= South African artist William Kentridge on his process.

www.google.com/search?q=post+secret&espv=2&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ei=-KjBU8mJEYrmsASlqoHwBg&ved=0CAYQ_AUoAQ&biw=1016&bih=464

= A list of Google images of postcards with messages and art; terrific examples of art.

Notes

1. Tzara, Tristan, in Kleon, Austin. *Newspaper Blackout*, xx
2. Masie, Elliott, cited in Rossett, 2002, in Carman, Jared. *Blended Learning Design: 5 Key Ingredients*, 1 (www.agilantlearning.com/pdf/Blended%20Learning%20Design.pdf)
3. found in Perloff, Marjorie. *Unoriginal Genius*, 147
4. www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/kenneth-goldsmith
5. Perloff, Marjorie. *Unoriginal Genius*, 21
6. Cesaire, Aime in Rankin, Claudia. *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, back cover
7. Rankin, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, also on the back cover
8. see: thecolbertreport.cc.com/videos/5tqazj/kenneth-goldsmith
9. www.nytimes.com/2013/06/19/books/seven-american-deaths-and-disasters-transcribes-the-news.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0
10. poetrycenter.arizona.edu/conceptualpoetry/cp_media/audio/goldsmithsessionweb.mp3
11. jacketmagazine.com/38/iv-smith-goldsmith.shtml
12. poetrycenter.arizona.edu/conceptualpoetry/cp_media/audio/goldsmithsessionweb.mp3
13. Goldsmith, Kenny, in *Being Boring*, found at epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith_boring.html
14. Ibid, epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith_boring.html
15. Ibid, epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith_boring.html
16. Hughes, Robert, *The Shock of the New*, 6-7

17. in Hughes, Robert, *The Shock of the New*, 356

18. www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/47403.John_Cage

19. in Kotz, Liz. *Words To Be Looked At*, 99

20. Kotz, Liz. *ibid*, 99

21. Kotz, Liz. *ibid*, 100

22. Kotz, Liz. *ibid*, 133

23. Kotz, Liz. *ibid*, 107

24. Kotz, Liz. *ibid*, 107

25. epc.buffalo.edu/authors/maclow/about/dlb.html

26. Tzara, Tristan, in Kleon, Austin. *Newspaper Blackout*, xix-xx

27. Scobie, Stephen. *Earthquakes and Explorations*, 162

28. Scobie, Stephen. *Ibid*, 162

29. Phillips, Tom. *A Humament*, notes

30. www.poetryfoundation.org/features/audioitem/1664, accessed 7/30/2014

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

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