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

Introduction

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Why should students in our schools, from the elementary grades to high school, study poetry? It's a fair question. Our seminar grappled with it in discussion, and all of these curriculum units address it within the context of their particular topics and classroom settings. I'll present my own answer here.

Poetry: an enthusiasm for it is hard to measure by national or local assessment standards. Now, this may itself be a reason to teach it, rather than the opposite: what is poetry if it isn't about resisting the reduction of communication to utility, to information delivery? For that matter, reading and writing poetry is always a test, a test of our verbal, imaginative, and emotional capacities, of what we can say, imagine, and feel, and there is no reason it should be easy to test. Even so, however, I think there is a lot in it that's useful for teachers and students – which may even be available for assessment purposes, if indirectly.

To get at what poetry has to teach, we have to get over the fear of poetry. Students feel it; teachers feel it. Why? It has to do with the fact that poetry is usually treated as something profound and serious. It isn't! Well, no, it certainly is. But just saying so is not a good way to show anyone what is profound or serious about it. Most approaches to poetry, starting in the primary grades and going all the way to college, focus on meaning. The danger in this approach is in turning poetry into something that's kept under lock and key, and that is therefore alien and resistant, a language for initiates, that has one right answer, and that is not something students might produce, respond to, or remember and care about once they leave your class. And even for students who get good at finding meaning, the approach loseswhat is specific about poetry.

By the specificity of poetry, I mean in particular its material, formal dimensions – the fact, for instance, that poetry is typically organized in lines, often according to rhythmic patterns, andalmost always structured by some element of verbal repetition. Poetry uses the sound of language (and the look of it too) to organize statements on a page or screen or stage. This sensory dimension of poetry promotes a formal consciousness in writers and readers that distinguishes poetry from other modes of communication and in so doing calls attention to some of the basic elements of *all* communication. It reminds us that, whatever is being said, we speak and listen with our senses and therefore with our bodies, even when we are silent, even when our eyes are closed.

And that's important. The formal patterning of poetry makes it uniquely well positioned to sensitize students, to *attune* them, to the material dimensions of language on which all communication always depends. It's a route, in other words, to fluency, to the love of words, and to an appreciation of their potential power. Poetry invites you (and because it's friendly, it also teaches you how) to grasp language whole: that is, how to put intellect and sense perception, thought and feeling together. That's essential to both basic literacy and

advanced interpretative skills. Or to put this another way: the formal dimension of language that poetry foregrounds is fundamental to meaning, rather than an adjunct to it. Meaning doesn't mean very much without it.

But this makes poetry sound more profound and serious and therefore more intimidating than ever. That's where games come in. It's an advantage in this respect that poetry has no immediately verifiable, testable utility. Writing poetry is almost as pointless as making art – or music! From one perspective, writing poetry (or reading it) is only play time. And that's exactly what poetry is, a refined, ancient form of play. It involves a great deal of work of course, whether you are writing or reading it, but it's a kind of work that's more like play than work. And play is nothing to be afraid of, is it?

In essence, our seminar was a crash course in poetic form. We began by looking at a piece of prose by Walter Pater that W. B. Yeats broke into lines to make a poem (he called it "Mona Lisa" – the passage came from Pater writing on Leonardo Da Vinci in *The Renaissance*) and placed it first in Yeats's *Oxford Anthology of Modern Poetry*. I gave the Fellows a poem by Elizabeth Bishop – a free verse poem that I formatted as a block of prose – and asked them to insert the line breaks, and then compare their choices with Bishop's. We considered the several patterns structuring William Carlos Williams's famous and seemingly casual, informal poem, "so much depends" (also known as "The Red Wheelbarrow").

And that was just our first seminar. The next day we went on to explore Anglo-Saxon alliterative meter in "The Seafarer" by Ezra Pound; blank verse – and more generally, accentual-syllabic meter – in Robert Frost's "Birches"; and the several, shifting metrical patterns in Langston Hughes's "The Weary Blues." We read and discussed syllabic poems – haiku in particular; also, rhyming poems from Alexander Pope's "Essay on Criticism" to Thom Gunn's AIDS-elegy "Lament", from Eric B. and Rakim's "Microphone Fiend" to the antic, provocative, more-outrageous-than-most-rappers Frederick Seidel and the clever, winning, eccentric miniaturist, Kay Ryan. We asked what happens when Robert Frost ends "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Eve" by saying the same thing twice, and what is the effect when W. C. Handy begins each verse of a blues song by saying the same thing twice?

We studied many other kinds of poem – sestinas, found poems, shape poems, ghazals; riddles, dramatic monologues; poems that are made out of lists and others that involve sustained metaphorical thinking. All of these we approached as types of game, involving certain rules and making use of certain tools. Our style of discussion was patient, exploratory, and collaborative. The point was to feel our way and to help each other along by comparing reactions, associations, observations.

We also spent time in seminar hearing about the units that fellows were working on, and sharing ideas and source materials. The stirring results follow. These curriculum units offer an exciting array of inventive classroom activities. But they are worth reading start to finish, because their authors have all taken time to reflect on the rationale for teaching poetry; in some cases, they've marshaled impressive research to deepen their arguments. They all also include important personal statements about their authors' work in the classroom as well as their experience of reading (and sometimes writing) poetry. Finally, all the units describe and share responses to specific poems. So the pleasures in poetry that they speak ofare not abstract or merely theoretical but concrete and demonstrated.

Particularly satisfying to me is the wide range of grades and ages and classroom challenges addressed in these units. Working in the elementary school classroom, Joyce Jacobson has designed a unit focused on Langston Hughes; it culminates in a convivial, communal "Poetry Café" – a miniature, age-appropriate version of the Harlem Renaissance soirées and rent parties that nurtured Hughes's poetry. Karin Foss's unit is

designed to help young children apprehend and gain appreciation for the formal, embodied features of language by focusing on animal poems – animals being creatures who have no language at all and yet who communicate with us on profound levels.

Kristen Leida and Teresa Strohl, both art teachers, have also written units for elementary school children. Teresa builds her unit around a bright, vigorous painting by Stuart Davis, which incorporates letters in its composition, while Kristen works with the comical, illustrated poetry of Shel Silverstein, among other authors. Both of these units demonstrate how poetry can teach young children about art, and vice versa. They activate and develop the visual dimension of poetry, while using poetry to get children closer to art.

Jen Giarrusso and Brandon Barr both teach ninth grade, and they have designed units that use poetry to assist their students as they make the big transition – academically and socially – from middle school to high school. Brandon's unit helps students gain a sense of their (and recognize and respect their classmates') emerging identities by focusing on the imaginative and expressive potentials of language in a wide variety of poems, thoughtfully selected and arranged in sequence for the purposes of the unit. Jen's unit focuses on a crazily-demanding verse form, the sestina, as a way to get her students to relax, learn that it's OK to play with words, and in the process discover that form is essential (not an adjunct or ornament) to content – a key recognition that will prepare them for the expectations of advanced literary analysis in high school and beyond.

Irene Jones and Jean Capacetti work in classrooms that could not be more different; yet they both use poetry ingeniously to address certain shared challenges. Irene's students are English Language Learners on a Navajo reservation in Arizona. Her unit uses a poem in a children's book about a regional ritual occasion – The Shiprock Fair – as a springboard into English-language learning that involves the children in drawing on and learning about Navajo tradition and culture. Jean's unit, written for his predominantly African-American students in beginning Spanish classes in the New Haven school system, uses Spoken Word poetry in English to draw his students in; then they create their own Spoken Word poetry integrating Spanish words and phrases: a literary form to which they respond easily and naturally becomes a bridge to a language and culture they sometimes resist and hang back from. Jean himself models this practice with a bilingual Spoken Word poem of his own composition.

All of these teachers encourage their students to play with words, to practice listening, speaking, and performing, and to take pleasure in language, on the assumption that that pleasure in language is an essential foundation for future studies. It can act as a bridge to basic fluency as well as to modes of formal analytic writing and thinking that are attentive to tone and expression and therefore foundational for advanced comprehension.

Stephanie Vest and Liz Daniell teach high school students preparing for AP exams. Stephanie's unit centers on William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* – mysterious poems that investigate innocence and experience in the context of the new industrial society of eighteenth century England. The subject might seem far away, but Stephanie takes Blake as a mirror for her students who find themselves between the innocence of childhood and the complex consciousness of adulthood. Liz's unit, which will be coordinated with her students' study of World War I in history class, focuses on the rich, poignant efflorescence of English poetry during the Great War. Liz uses history as a way into poetry for students who are unaccustomed to reading it. At the same time, poetry adds depth, immediacy, and particularity to their study of history. These units both draw on some of the highlights of poetry in English.

Our seminar Coordinator, Sydney Coffin, teaches poetry as an arts elective in a Philadelphia high school. His unit will invite students to create collage poems by cutting up and pasting language found in magazines,

which will sometimes take the form of shape poems. This practice takes part in the tradition of found art that runs from Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades to contemporary Conceptual Poetry. The avant-garde is alive and well in Sydney's classroom, where his students will find that playing with words is a way not only to make poems, but to make other people's words their own, and thus to achieve an active, creative relation to the world around them, which they might otherwise assume was simply given, nothing for them, and not something that can be changed.

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