



Poetry and Public Life through Cultural Perspective and Relevancy

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“Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence”-Robert Frost

Introduction

Reading literature has always been the enjoyment of entertainment for many. Variation of literary experience brings suspense, laughter, fear, hope, and more. Young children, especially at the elementary level, are used to being entertained by these texts. It seems normal and expected by both students and teachers. But then, there is another form of text that has been mind blowing for students in both positive and negative ways. This form of text is called “poetry” or “poems”. I say it’s mind blowing because of the unfamiliarity of the text structure as well as the vocabulary usage involved in these poems. How can one call this text entertainment if he or she struggles to comprehend and understand the formal features of a poem? For this reason, this unit is developed to help learners become familiar with poetry and understand the elements of a poem. In addition, the activities in the unit will make poetry reading a part of students’ entertainment and make it fun to begin reading poetry frequently.

As Robert Frost says above, poetry is one way that we learn about our world and our surroundings. Basically, we learn more about our surroundings by listening to each other’s views. This passage was quoted and explicated by a president of a university when introducing Maya Angelou as a guest speaker. He said “All of us have ideas, experience, and perspectives to bring to the table, but none of us knows so much about life and the world that we have nothing to learn from listening to others. The willingness to listen and to look at things from the perspective of others enriches our personal understanding of life and the world, and is also an essential part of succeeding in today’s global economy.”¹ Poetry is a written text to express ourselves for this purpose in special ways and carries a voice to be heard by the reader. Poetry is a way, especially for people of many ethnicities, to express what they feel and to actually be heard with responsiveness. Everyone needs to take the time to listen and be open-minded in order to hear others through their writings. Many poets have published poems to express themselves and challenge their audience to feel and hear what they have to say.

Poetry is becoming more acceptable because it is coming to be more widely understood that it is an unusually expressive medium. As a result, through poems, we are becoming more willing to understand someone's statement or message. Even beyond understanding there is a willingness to learn about a poet's attitude, behavior and culture. Poems are becoming popular for many outside of the Dine nation. In our poetry seminar, it was mentioned that poetry can offer insight into public life in the political setting. For example, a number of poems have been used to convey a message to the president or to address the public of the United States at presidential inaugurations.²

Research shows that students are able to comprehend and perform well on student achievement if instruction is relevant to the lives of the students. Reference to the student's background and cultural knowledge is one way to increase the student's achievement.³ Studies indicate that the usage of cultural material builds a bridge to learning, to understanding the concept offered in a lesson. In this unit, the activities and resources are relevant and appropriate for the students. The resources provide cultural knowledge, experiences, and prior knowledge which will increase participation and student motivation. Only then, the students will be able to comprehend the objectives of what is being taught.

Rationale

Education has become more rigorous than ever before. Students are expected to be at a higher rigor level than their parents ever were. Students are expected to be well prepared and do well on their state mandated assessment. As for Arizona, the standard for reading a different form of text includes poems. The state standard reads: "Refer to parts of stories, dramas, and poems when writing or speaking about a text, using terms such as chapter, scene, and stanza; describe how each successive part builds on earlier sections". This emphasis begins as early as second grade but is tested after the beginning of third grade. Although lower grades such as kindergarten through second grade use a simple form of poems, in this case "nursery rhymes", this emphasis still introduces new rigor. Students are expected to name the elements of a poem, and also read and answer questions pertaining to the content of the poem. For many students, this task is difficult. Students of the Dine Nation are able to read simple poems but the language involved, the structure of the text, the organization of the text, makes it difficult for them to do well on their assessment--let alone consider this type of text entertainment to read for enjoyment.

This unit is created to help students, especially students of the Dine Nation, to become familiar with poetry and find it as enjoyable to read as any other form of literature. The activities are directed to students who live on the Dine Nation because of the familiar content of the poems. Poems selected are geared towards the student's experiences and connect to their prior knowledge. The poems selected feature authors that are aware of and familiar with the students' culture. The poetry is carefully selected to increase students' background knowledge as well as for cultural relevance. Authors include Sherman Alexie, Orlando White, Luci Tapohanso, Shonto Begay, and Nancy Bo Flood. In addition, other authors such as Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein, as well as some nursery rhymes, will be included for comparison and variation. Nursery rhymes will be used to introduce the unit of study as something familiar from the early years of education.

Not only the content but also the formal elements of the poems will be addressed. Students will identify the *stanza, verse, lines, couplet, alliteration, rhythm, rhyming, tone and mood (the basic genre)*. The unit is structured to include activities to help students be familiar with the features of a poem. The vocabulary words

are the key elements and very important for the students to learn. The main key factor involving this unit is the use of cultural relevancy.

Demographics

The school where I intend to implement these activities is located in Tsaille, Arizona. Tsaille is one of the seven public schools in the Chinle Unified School District. The unit is targeted for third grade, but as in any curriculum, it can be modified to fit kindergarten through eighth grade. Tsaille Public School is located in a rural and beautiful north eastern part of Arizona. Tsaille Public School enrolls preschool to eighth grade students. The school's yearly enrollment is registered at about 450 students. The ratio of the number of students per teacher is about 25 to 1. There are two classes per grade up to sixth grade. At the Junior High level, the five common core classes consist of one class. The school is pretty much equipped with technology such as document camera, eno board for interaction, projector, laptops, and tablets.

The percentage of Native American (majority Dine) is about ninety-nine percent. One percent is of other ethnicity. At least fifty percent of the student population speaks their native language, which is Navajo language. The majority of the students are exposed to their native language at home and the English language is picked up at school. Hence the challenge of learning vocabulary words becomes visible. There is no reinforcement for learning the vocabulary words or terminology that one needs to learn while learning the objectives. The majority of the students live with grandparents while parents are away in a nearby town or in a faraway city to work. The socio-economic conditions of the families of the community are considered to be at a low income or dependent on benefits for survival. One hundred percent of the students receive a free lunch program through a grant that the school qualified for.

The community of Tsaille consists of an estimated 1,200 in population. Tsaille is located at the base of Chuska Mountain range and interestingly plotted in what seems in a forest and then out into the open land. There is only one convenient gas station, a community college, and few homes clustered in groups. Others live in the vicinity of Tsaille in wide open spaces. The life style of the majority population reflects the traditional native culture of the Dine. Children grow up learning their native language and involving themselves in traditional ceremonies, activities and events. Some of the activities were carried on from generation to generation. Where there is a conversation among friends and families, their choice of words is tied in with their environment and their familiar life styles and culture: the Dine language, live stock, sheep, hunting, fishing, and family events such as special gatherings, trips, and social activities in communities.

Poetry and cultural relevancy: The history behind why teachers need to incorporate culture

For a long time in the history of Native American education, Native Americans were forced into a program of assimilation into the European way of life. During this period, Native Americans struggled to grasp the changes and the demands of a different educational system. ⁴ The new way of life made it difficult for Native Americans to succeed in education. Students were affected by the change in a negative way. The dropout

rate of Native Americans began to climb. Why was it difficult for Native Americans to succeed in this educational setting? Largely at fault was the content of materials being taught. As time went by, Non-Native and Native Americans began to see that cultural differences had an effect on success in education. Through time, the insistence on everyone looking alike and learning alike began to slowly diminish.⁵ Throughout the United States, the schools that identified students as English Language Learner began to see a change in the way students were instructed. The English Language Learners pushed for the No Child Left Behind Act to be passed. Schools started implementing ELL (English Language Learner) methods, and strategies were beginning to be implemented. The acceptance of cultural difference began to seep into the educational system. The importance of cultural acceptance and using that as a bridge to close the gap in education became one of the strategies to increase student achievement. To this day, use of cultural knowledge and awareness became one of the key components in strategies and activities. This was a way to have students become successful in the school setting. Unfortunately, as time went on, through extensive assimilation, the traditional culture and way of life has all but disappeared for many Native Americans.

Today, Native Americans live in much more modern surroundings than in the past. It is not common to find Native Americans living in teepees or wearing their traditional regalia on a daily basis. Instead many of the traditional elements in their lineage way of life can only be seen during special events or occasions. Today's children are living in a westernized world. Dine students are exposed to a different way of life, such as attending a rodeo, going to church, going the fair, attending family celebration events. At the same time, certain practices of the Dine culture continue to be instilled in the children and their family by family members who are keeping the Dine tradition and beliefs alive. These are beliefs that are carried down from generation to generation, such as sacred ceremonies, speaking the Dine language itself, family gathering and expectations of how one should live—by farming, hunting, tending to live stock, beading and rug weaving. These social events are the background knowledge which then becomes their way of life. So in essence, culturally relevant themes should be chosen to deliver instruction to Native Americans in learning about poetry.

The bleachers are packed full.

Everyone's watching.

What if I fall?

What if my time is too slow?

One more rider, then

me.

"Next rider up!"

I click my tongue,

push my boots hard in the stirrups,

heels down.

My hands are sweaty,

but I hold the reins right.

Ready, girl.

Ride!

I bust through the gate,
spin round the first barrel,
shoot to the second
and circle around tight,
leaning so hard, my stirrup kicks dirt.

Streak to the last barrel—
spin, fly, race down the middle.

*Home!*⁶

Because there are some forms of culture in the modern American West that overlap with the Dine culture, students can relate to this poem composed by Nancy Bo Flood, *Barrel Racer*.⁷ On the Dine nation, for entertainment, a family outing such as attending a rodeo at the local community arena is a part of modern culture. The poem demonstrates the feeling of being a part of the rodeo from a contestant perspective. Students on the Dine nation would be able to relate to such an event and comprehend the poem easily because many of them have been exposed to the event and all know about it. Flood's poem is an example of what can be used when teaching the concept of poetry by connecting to student's prior knowledge. Moreover, the poem can be used to explain what a poem is. The poem provides entertainment for students and provides a concrete image of what the poem is about. They will be comfortable with the key words.

Excerpt from "*In my Mother's Kitchen*"

Childhood dreams and warmth

Tight in my throat, tears in my eyes

The radio softly tuned to a local AM station

News of ceremonies and chapter meetings

And funerals

Flows into the peaceful kitchen

Lines upon her face, features carved of hard times

Lines around her eyes, creases of happy times

Bittersweet tears and ringing silvery laughter

I ache in my heart⁸

Excerpt from “*Many Faces, Many Stories*”

Sounds of traditional song and dance contests

Contrast with blaring bass rap songs

Children cry as mothers and fathers

comfort them

Laughter and shouting from the carnival

Sounds of a far off rodeo announcer

Navajo Language mixes with teen language

Cups of coffee and sodas⁹

These two poems written by Shonto Begay, “*In my Mother’s Kitchen*”¹⁰ and “*Many Faces, Many Stories*,”¹¹ exemplify the Dine cultural perspective on family ties. Not only will the students find them enjoyable to read, they will be able to actually relate to them. Finding materials that provide cultural perspective is great, but finding the material that the author is familiar with is a plus, especially when it incorporates teacher and student content knowledge. Of his writing and art, Begay says, “I work to bring my own art, my own traditions, my own people, to places where they don’t know about us. I believe in sharing that story and in finding ways to let kids express themselves the same way.”¹² The first excerpt above is culturally relevant to the Dine children. In homes of the Dine, one will often find a mother figure, even if it is a grandmother, an aunt, or a sister, in the special role of caring for the young. The setting and the illustrating of the poem (Begay is also an artist) provides visual aid. Another poem that students can relate to is Luci Tapahonso’s piece “*Naneeskadi*”.¹³ The poem offers rich detail on how a mother would make bread for her loved ones. The poems of course provide cultural relevancy and background knowledge because the students are exposed to this type of figure or role model. In addition, students will be able to grasp most of the words in the text so they should be able to comprehend the message or theme of the poem.

In addition to cultural relevancy, the early educational setting also features trans-cultural materials. In Kindergarten or even at a preschool level, students learn nursery rhymes. These poems also become a part of standard teaching when students learn about rhythm. For many Native Americans, some of the content in these nursery rhymes is foreign to them. When they hear “*Here we go around the Mulberry Bush*” or “*Hot Cross Buns*”, our students see no sense in them. Not all nursery rhymes concern strange subjects, however. “*Baa Baa Black Sheep*” is one where connection from the text can be made. Students on the Dine nation are familiar with sheep. The majority of the Dine people own a sheep or live stock.

Nursery rhymes are great to use as a resource even though students are in the older or upper class, because

they are a good introduction to the importance of sound in poetry. Getting creative in further implementing these types of poem will make it interesting and fun for the most part. This unit will address some of these possibilities in the activities section, explaining what can go beyond just reading and reciting the poems. ¹⁴

As mentioned before, Native Americans went through a period of assimilation that negatively affected the holistic way of life of the Dine people. Many encountered racism, bias behavior, and enforced assimilation that affected the identity of oneself.¹⁵ Through these triumphs, changes in the people began to show. These changes and the effects of it, is seen through the society and the public life of the Dine nation. Sherman Alexie, most of these social changes in his poems. Often he talks about the rough life and the negative behavior that he had been exposed to. A few of his poems strike a more positive note about family and Navajo culture. One must be aware that when thinking of using his poems as a resource, one must be selective. Some of his poems may not be suitable for young children. Several poets besides Sherman Alexie had written about changes in family values and attitudes from a negative perspective. These negative perspectives reflect on the history and turmoil of the Dine culture. What if the Dine people or any other Native Americans had never been exposed to acculturation, what would it have been like today? The fact is that it did happen, and the effects of it show through the social problems of the Native Americans. Sherman Alexie and other poets have written about these social problems:

*The football field rises
to meet the mesa. Indian boys
gallop across the grass, against
the beginnings of their body.
On those Saturday afternoons,
unbroken horses gather to watch
their sons growing larger
in the small parts of the world.
Everyone is the quarterback.
There is no thin man in a big hat
writing down all the names
in two columns: winners and losers.
This is the eternal football game,
Indians versus Indians. All the Skins
in the wooden bleachers fancydancing,
stomping red dust straight down*

*into nothing. Before the game is over,
the eighth-grade girls' track team
comes running, circling the field,
their thin and brown legs echoing
wild horses, wild horses, wild horses.*¹⁶

Sherman Alexie's poem "At a Navajo Monument Valley Tribal School"¹⁷ is a great piece to use when discussing culture, tying it in with identity of who the reader is and learning to look for background knowledge. In doing so, it will allow students to become open about looking or listening for the voice, theme or central message of the poem. This poem is a little more positive than usual about the boarding school era and what it was like to be in school then. It describes a surrounding full of descriptive objects that sound familiar to writer and the audience alike.

A sense of cultural belonging is important to impart in education. It is even more important to ground yourself locally now that we inescapably live in a multicultural global society. When Native American students are taught an objective, one must remember to use culturally relevant materials. But as we begin to open the doors, there is a whole world we need to understand and learn about. The effects of multicultural education take over in the classroom. As we learn about our environment through reading, it is also important to learn to read about other cultures as well through poetry. When learning of other cultures, we will find similarities and differences. Learning about other cultures fosters acceptance and broadens horizons.

Shel Silverstein's "Dirty Face" and Dr. Seuss's "Shapes"¹⁸ will mix the familiar with the unfamiliar. This will make the students less intimidated. Dr. Seuss's poem "Shapes" also provides a different type of rhythm and pattern. Both Shel Silverstein and Dr. Seuss can encourage imaginative response and even acting out the story.¹⁹ One might also introduce "concrete poems," the shape of which imitates their subject matter. The figures and drawings in these poems elicit creativity from the readers. Reading poetry is not just for understanding the text. Reading poetry also involves learning the terminology and becoming familiar with the elements of poetry. Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein poems can be used to teach the elements as well as poetry terminologies.²⁰ As students learn the terminology, they get accustomed to learn the vocabulary and it becomes a part of their learning style.

Objectives

This unit will cover basically three objectives. They will be fulfilled in order in a span of 15 days. As the objectives are introduced, they will follow from objectives in previous lessons. The first objective for this unit is to teach students the elements of poetry. Students will be exposed to variety of poems to encourage them to identify the simple elements of a poem such as: verse, stanza, line, couplet, rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, and figurative language. Studies show that students who are exposed to learning the terminology are able to do better on their assessments. Not having mastered a descriptive vocabulary is the leading cause of

academic failure in grades 3 through 12. The students who are deficient in vocabulary will find it harder to answer questions and comprehend the text assigned. As in any culture or home life, family members are not likely to help with this by discussing poetry. People in our community are not likely to ask their children at the end of the day, “What type of figurative language did you find in your readings today, or what line or stanza did you find the most interesting part of the poem?” Therefore, most of the terminology that the students will acquire will come from the school setting--which means the classroom will have to be equipped with vocabulary word walls, samples or examples to explain, and a setting to provide hands on materials. The activities in this unit will better prepare students to use the vocabulary needed to acquire the understanding of poetry. Students who learn the terminology at the beginning will have a better understanding of “poetry discussion” when it comes to assessment. This in turn will help students achieve better on their comprehension questions.

The second objective that the students will learn is to understand the content of a poem. What is the poem trying to convey to its audience? Realizing this objective is another important means of understanding of why a poem is written. On the Dine nation, students are not typically attracted to poetry. Although fictional literature is assigned as a part of homework, students are not given poems by choice to take home to read. Once again at the school setting, the learner will have to be provided with strategies to use when it comes to understanding what they are reading. The students will learn how to interpret and how to analyze a poem. The activities will involve highlighting of key words, imagery through drawing, and the use of graphic organizers. Students will also work collaboratively and be involved in certain given activities. Through analyzing the poem, the students should be able to understand the purpose of the poem, identify the central message or theme of the poem, understand the author’s purpose, and seek and use background information to get a better grasp of the poem. Through learning these strategies, students should be able to answer questions about the poem when an assessment is administered.

The last objective is for the students to be able to write a poem. After learning to understand the components of a poem, and to understand the message of a poem, students should be able to compose a poem. The reading goes hand in hand with writing. It is essential that students should do writing along with reading. Their poems can be written in structures and thematic types that they choose: rhyming, haiku, concrete poem through the use of alliteration, focus on adjectives, etc.

Strategies

The majority of the students are Native Americans, as mentioned in the demographics, and for the most part their Native language is their first language. Hence the students have limited vocabulary development when it comes reading literature and text features. Students do not get the vocabulary development at home in normal daily conversation. Therefore, students will be exposed to lessons encouraging vocabulary development. This will be done through providing activities that will increase their ability to describe poetry. Students will have visual aids, incorporate technology in the classroom, and be exposed to poems that they are able to grasp through prior knowledge.

There will be discussion among students, so the arrangements of desk will be in groups of four, or set up in pairs. Graphic organizer is another way students will be able to obtain new vocabulary that will sustain them for future reference. Such graphic organizers as the four corners method or strategies based on Robert

Marzano and Debra J Pickering's reference book, *Building Academic Vocabulary Teacher's Manual*²¹ is one way to teach vocabulary.

The strategies to teach analyzing and interpreting poems will go forward through collaboration. For the most part, the lesson will begin with the teacher modeling strategies followed by the gradual release method. The lessons will involve activities through highlighting, general discussing, and drawing pictures. I believe that through the use of these strategies the students will be able to return to them when it comes to analyzing poems. In doing so, the students will be able to better answer their questions about central message, theme or purpose of the poem.

The last strategy that will be incorporated is the use of writing. This writing will also be used as assessment of the unit. An anthology of poems will be collected and bound as a resource. Students will show by writing themselves what it is that they have learned about the parts of poetry and comprehending the poems. All these strategies will be aimed at igniting writers. The students will be involved in creating their own poems as a means of learning how poems are created and written. As an incentive, I hope to have students write their poems to music or bind a collection of poems in a big book. As another rewarding incentive, I hope to invite our local poet, "Orlando White," into the classroom and have him actually read to the students. I believe this will motivate the students and increase their interest when it comes to the modern poems that they will be required to read for their assessment.

Activities

Week 1: Elements of Poetry

The activities will follow in a sequential order to allow students to better grasp learning the important skills of poetry. The first week of the lesson, the objective is to have students identify the structural elements of poetry. Students will begin to understand that poetry involves rhythms, verse, stanza, line, couplet, rhyme, alliteration, and figurative language. In order to learn structural elements, students will become familiar with key vocabulary words. For the first couple of days, 30 minutes a day, vocabulary words will be displayed and labeled on a poem as a model for students to use as visual aid. After the third day, students will begin to dissect a poem to find the elements of a poem. Students will be asked how they know a poem looks like a poem. What are the elements of a poem? I will model how to identify the elements of a poem. As mentioned, nursery rhymes, Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein will be used to teach the elements of poetry. Students will work in groups and independently daily during the activities for reinforcement. Assessment will be given at the end of the first week. The assessment will be in a written format where students will have to identify and label the elements of poetry. As an extension, students can take a multiple choice assessment as well to ensure consistency of the retention.

In addition to the first week's activity, the class will invite a local poet, Orlando White, who is an instructor at the local college, to give a demonstration of what poetry is. He will reinforce how poems are written and discuss the components of a poem. He will also elaborate on how he became a poet himself, what got him interested in writing poems. He could share some insights on what makes a poem a poem, as well as discuss the forms of poems.

Week 2: Comprehension of Poetry

The second week of learning about poetry involves comprehension. The objective of the lesson is to analyze and dissect the poems by lines or stanza. Students will be introduced to poems written by Sherman Alexie, Orlando White, Luci Tapohanso, Shonto Begay, and Nancy Bo Flood. Students will be involved in highlighting key words to analyze the meaning of a line or stanza. There will be group discussion or think, pair share. One of the strategies to incorporate in this activity is to provide background knowledge about the poem and go over vocabulary used in the poem. The students will be involved in sharing and discussion. Students will also sequence the order of the parts in the poem to help with comprehension. Another activity in helping with comprehension is to use graphic organizer to analyze the poem. Students will be given a form to fill out to analyze a poem. The assessment for this activity will be to ask or answer questions about a poem, such as the following questions; in the first stanza, what is the message or main idea of the poem? Who is the character? The questions should bring out aspects of the poems. Appropriate questions might be: what traits does a speaker or character have? What is the grandmother like? The last part of this activity will be to create an imaginary picture of the poem. Students will draw their interpretation of the poems as they read. The purpose of the activity is to understand what the poem is conveying to the audience.

Week 3: Writing a Poem

The third week of the unit involves students writing a poem. The students' cultural familiarity with an interest in what they have been reading will make them more active and interested in writing poems. Students will select words and phrases to create a collective class poem, which they will then turn into a performance. This lesson helps students to refer to the text they are reading in a different medium and setting. This activity makes students more insightful readers and helps develop creativity in thinking and writing. Students will write simple types of poetry using rhyming and alliteration. Another form is the acrostic. Students will use their names, parent's name, or an alphabetical sequence to write an acrostic poem. Another form of poetry that the students will be exposed to is Haiku. The poems written will be culturally relevant. When students have composed the poems, they will be displayed and shared as a part of our reading collection.

Appendices

Implementing Arizona State Standards

Reading

Refer to parts of stories, dramas, and poems when writing or speaking about a text, using terms such as chapter, scene, and stanza; describe how each successive part builds on earlier sections. (3.RL.5)

Key Ideas and Details

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

1. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
2. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
3. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

1. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
2. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
3. Ask and answer questions about information from a speaker, offering appropriate elaboration and detail. (3.SL.3)
4. Create engaging audio recordings of stories or poems that demonstrate fluid reading at an understandable pace; add visual displays when appropriate to emphasize or enhance certain facts or details. (3.SL.5)

Writing

1. Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons.
2. Introduce the topic or text they are writing about, state an opinion, and create an organizational structure that lists reasons.

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