

POETRY DOESN'T HAVE TO HURT: A SELF-DISCOVERY COMPOSITION- POETRY TEACHING METHOD

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For students to become comfortable enough with poetry to freely write about it, they must first discover the poetry in themselves. My composition/poetry teaching method allows this discovery through writing. I begin the unit with Peter Elbow's techniques for loosening up with poetry as "no big deal."

During "poetry fun week," my first unthreatening, unruly class introduction to poetry, students experience poetry's freeing qualities by writing and discussing poetry in a loose, casual manner. During the first session the class creates a poem together, producing good feelings about poetry by yielding humorous results and some good lines. I pass around a sheet of paper on which each student writes a line of poetry, while viewing only the previous line. While the poem circulates, the class discusses a previously-assigned journal entry—to select one poem in the poetry text that they like and write about why they like it. Two beneficial results appear from this journal assignment and class discussion of it: students investigate the poetry text and experience a poem meaningful to them.

Another of Elbow's activities useful during "poetry fun week" is a type of poetry-prolific writing. Students and teacher scribble lines non-stop, with each line beginning with the same word or phrase. "When" and "I wish" generate lines easily. Beginning lines with a person's name helps generate emotional material. Calling out to

a person loved or hated comes from the gut, as in this classroom-generated example written to an old woman who befriended a student as a child:

Corey, where are you?
Corey, thanks for the bit-o-honey candy bars and
the cool water from the red pitcher.
Corey, thanks for the jigsaw puzzles and soap
operas.
Corey, thanks for making a lonely little girl feel
special.

After each poetry-prolific writing session, the class shares the lines aloud, and suddenly individuals realize they've written poetry. Not mysterious, elevated verse, but simple discoveries. Poetry.

After relaxing the students through this first-hand poetry experience, "poetry fun week" continues the loosening up process with poetry by established poets. E.E. Cummings' "in Just" leads to free, childlike association with poetry as well as discussions of the connection of poetic form and meaning. Childhood poems such as those in Robert Louis Stevenson's "A Child's Garden of Verses" also remind students of childhood and past childlike enjoyment of poetry. At this stage I require only informal writing, such as freewriting and journal entries, which encourages lively class discussions of the poetry. Students also bring in favorite poems from childhood to share with classmates, ranging from "The Inky-dinky Spider" to "Hey Diddle Diddle."

Following the discussion of the childhood poetry, we think about childhood and write a timed poetry prolific writing (10 minutes) of lines beginning with "I remember." Then, following Peter Elbow's technique, we shape the lines into a poem of three rough stanzas—each stanza beginning with "I remember." In this semi-structured yet creative assignment the poetry guidelines help structure-oriented students not to panic while still allowing creativity to flow. Then students write an essay from the poem, focusing on a childhood experience. Children view life in a fresh, creative manner because everything is new and wondrous; these lively remembrances produce lively writing like the following excerpt from a student's essay:

The word around the neighborhood was that street paving
machines were coming down our street. As the word spread,

the excitement grew, along with the sound of rumbling trucks coming nearer and nearer. The whole block was in my front yard as the asphalt spreader crept by. . . . We stood in respectful wonder as the lava-like rock spread the asphalt thin and even. Then the big mistake came. Someone dared me to walk on the steamy rock. The dare came, not from a fellow kindergarten graduate like me, but a sixth grader named Butch, the B.B.B., or big bully on the block. Oh, how I had always wanted to impress Butch. Now was my chance! If anyone else had dared me it would be unthinkable to place my tan, bare fet on that solid fire, but to gain Butch's respect was possibly the greatest thing since Lincoln logs.

These essays sparkle with honest and lively childhood memories—honesty and liveliness that show up again in following essays about poetry. Poetry comes alive. Student writing also comes alive.

The childhood essay produces a smooth transition from informal writing to essay writing, the next step in my teaching method. In *Beat Not the Poor Desk*, Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen describe an observations-prolific writing composition teaching technique that fits smoothly into the discovery composition/literature course because students write essays about their ideas—not the teacher's. In this system, students first read the poem carefully and then write non-stop observations (concrete details about the poem) for approximately 10 minutes. I begin this technique in the classroom, and participate in the activities (according to Ponsot and Deen's instructions). When the allotted time period is up, the group verbally shares observations. Students usually have initial difficulty separating ideas and observations. Statements such as "That's a good idea—what observation led you to that?" help clarify the difference while sparing the brave commentor's ego.

After group sharing of observations, students choose the best or most interesting observation(s) and write prolifically for 20-30 minutes. Again, I participate with the students, providing a model for this new activity.

The prolific writing creates a group of abstract ideas based upon concrete observations; both may be molded into an essay rough draft. For example, a typical observation about Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" notes that the line "Good fences make good neighbors" is repeated several times. Prolific writing on this observation might question why the line is repeated, leading to abstract ideas about

walls between different people and cultures. These ideas lead to essay topics based on concrete details from the poem.

At first some students may react adversely to Ponsot and Deen's observations/prolific writing technique, especially those who are structure-oriented and/or functioning on low levels of cognitive development. This technique requires the interplay of concrete and abstract thinking, a higher-order cognitive function impossible for students who have never explored or valued their thoughts to immediately master. My weaning technique for such students teaches them the conventions of abstract thinking by enabling students who can abstract to share their thinking processes with the class.

First, the class discusses assigned poems for later essays. I list on the blackboard all abstract ideas about a poem's meaning generated by the discussion. I also ask students to explain how they arrive at individual ideas, which helps other students see the connection of abstract ideas to concrete observations.

Using one class-generated idea, students then write an essay on a poem's theme. I instruct students to forget they are writing *about* a poem and instead *take command* of the poem's meaning. The meaning becomes the topic for the student-essay. For instance, an essay using an idea from "Mending Wall" might discuss society's blind adherence to tradition.

After a rough draft is completed, the next part of the assignment begins. Now the students relate their essays to the poem. Thus, they relate personal experience and individual thought to the poem. Now they've written an essay on their ideas and experience, based on concrete details from the poem that correspond with their essays' details. This assignment helps students veer away from formal, flat writing about poetry that incorporates none of their own thoughts, feelings, and experience. The steps in the process allow students to move gradually into the observations-prolific writing technique.

Poem choice is all-important in my discovery composition/poetry method because poem selection greatly influences essay style. I provide a list of poems from which the students may choose, often grouping poetry under broad categories such as "Death poetry," "Spring poetry," and "Love poetry." This allows students the freedom to write about poems meaningful to them, which heightens writing purpose and motivation.

Intuitive imitation is what I call poetry's subtle stylistic influence on student-writing. Essays written about structured, rhyming poems

often seem formal and stilted while more freely-structured poems lead to freer writing. Robert Burns' "Oh, My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose" produces repetitious, boring essays, but E.E. Cummings' "in Just" sparks lively, innovative essays.

One student's "breakthrough" essay resulted from "in Just." Until this essay, his ideas and sentence structure were confusing. The following highlights from his essay reveal marked improvement:

Cummings invented words and structured his sentences in an "off-beat" way, showing the liveliness of spring.

The use of childhood games symbolizes the rebirth of spring.

Cummings uses the young, energetic characteristics of children to represent spring.

The structure of the poem enables the reader to feel young and full of life.

This student discovered the union of structure and subject matter in poetry, and his essay's structure and subject matter improved and harmonized. "in Just" led to this discovery by appealing to his playful nature.

The sea's smooth movement in Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" inspired several students to write "breakthrough" essays that flowed as smoothly and eloquently as the sea. One such student, plagued by syntactical problems, acquired a sense of rhythm and clarity from Arnold's words, as is shown in this excerpt from his essay:

When Arnold describes the water as music, he sets the pace for the rest of the poem. One can feel the water coming and going when Arnold describes the pebbles being moved back and forth in the water. A tempo is set by his choice of words . . . The water is like an orchestra scaling up to a high note, back down, and then up again.

Another student, a U.S. resident for only three years, also produced a "breakthrough" "Dover Beach" essay. He grew up beside the sea in South Vietnam, and the poem touched chords of longing in his soul that flowed through the essay in quietly passionate waves:

The sea has different meanings to different people. In the eyes of the traveler, the sea is a wonderful place to take a vaca-

tion. In the eyes of the refugee who escapes from a Communist regime by boat, the sea is terrifying . . . Watching the tide roll in and out on the beach, Arnold relates his thoughts about the faith of people in God. He compares the strength of faith to the strength and the expanse of the sea . . . As the boundaries of the sea change each day, so changes the human life. In society, people deceive and take advantage of each other. They struggle to gain power and riches which they must leave behind when they die. That is why Matthew Arnold called the human life dark, boring, and unsteady.

In addition to structure, poem content also influences student essays. Theodore Roethke's imagery in "Root Cellar" generates richly descriptive student essays. One student discovered description's unique idea presentation in her essay on "Root Cellar":

The author also tells about the scary shoots growing in the cellar. He describes them as if they are alive and ready to attack when he says they "hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical snakes."

The beauty of the root cellar is that everything is fighting for survival, and even in this dreary place, life exists.

This student continued to use description effectively in later essays.

These sudden student discoveries may seem miraculous, but the reasons for such revelations are based on theory. Writing, a product and process of thinking, requires mature cognitive development. According to cognitive psychology, thinking processes grow developmentally; only after reaching the mature stages is one capable of the high-level thought processes involved in writing, such as abstracting, synthesizing, and forming coherent logical relationships.

Writing teachers possess a special opportunity to help students grow cognitively through carefully designed writing heuristics. Effective writing is effective thinking. In "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer," Andrea Lunsford synthesizes cognitive psychology and composition/rhetoric theory; according to Lunsford, the work of psychologists Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner shows that "cognitive development moves first from doing, to doing consciously, and only then to formal conceptualization" (259). In other words, we learn by doing and then extrapolating principles from our activities. Just as you have read this article and are now connecting the theory

with the method, so students must study literature and their own writing processes after experiencing them. This direct experience leads to the discovery of the conventions of a variety of discourse types. And, the conventions of a variety of discourse types can be taught while guiding students into cognitive growth. The connection of self to literature that occurs in discovery oriented composition/literature courses promotes such growth.

My composition/poetry teaching method allows students to experience poetry and their own writing, then to analyze their writing processes, and finally to synthesize all the information gained from doing and analyzing. This synthesis occurs intuitively or automatically. New and old knowledge merge in the act of writing about conscious attention to the new. Instead of simply and coldly analyzing poetry, students *experience* it. Such experience leads to true learning—learning that reveals itself in intuitive leaps resulting from internalized patterns.

Writing about poetry becomes painful to students because we train them to dig for “hidden meanings” without providing a proper shovel. The discovery that meaning flows in personal mind-rivers that connect to universal thought-oceans frees students to float fearlessly into the unknown. Poetry doesn’t have to hurt.

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