



Close Reading *and* Personal Connection: The Power of Poetry

SUMMARY

Literary forms such as poetry are important and vital elements of the curriculum. This author describes how poetry can be used to inspire and engage learners. It is a form of text that can serve as the focus of a close read, similar to other texts. She offers examples of text-dependent questions that can be used in conjunction with questions that seek personal connections and expressions.

At a time when the Common Core Learning Standards are front and center in terms of educators' time and attention, and the focus is on emphasizing informational text, the importance of the arts in obtaining and sustaining student engagement cannot be neglected. Poetry as an art form can elicit deeply personal expression, energize the classroom environment, and contribute to a range of educational goals. And yes, students can benefit from a close reading of this type of text as well as simply letting the sense of a poem spark their imagination for creative writing or discussion. There is value in both.

The *New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy (CCLS/ELA)* address poetry in multiple standards. For example, students will:

“Interpret, analyze, and evaluate narratives, poetry, and drama,

artistically and ethically by making connections to: other texts, ideas, cultural perspectives, eras, personal events, and situations.” (p. 47)

“Create poetry, stories, plays, and other literary forms...” (p. 57)

Curran (2013) notes that the anchor standards found in the CCLS/ELA call upon students to demonstrate many skills that are enhanced through the use of poetry — such as making inferences, analyzing themes, interpreting words and phrases, and assessing how point of view shapes a text. The CCLS/ELA Instructional Shifts related to staying *deeply connected to the text and responding to ideas presented in the text* are demonstrated in the following description. Poetry can be used as the focus of a *close read* as well as a jumping-off point for personal expression and exploration. Poetry can impact students' attitudes about themselves as valuable, creative and engaged learners.

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Nurturing the Creative Spirit Within

As a very young child, I would often play with words and ideas — simple rhymes written in iambic pentameter. Children often believe, as I did, that the primary function of poetry is as a place to hold rhythms and rhymes rather than to communicate ideas. My early attempts at poetry gave no indication that I would one day grow into an individual who would be a published poet. “I have a cousin named Gerard/I think his ears are very odd” and “My mother is the best/better than all the rest” gave no hint of my inner wishes, hopes or talent. They were simplistic rhymes.

Flash forward to a time when growing emphasis (overemphasis, some would argue) is being placed on what can be measured by standardized tests of achievement. How do we reinforce the joy of living a literate life, so that students are better able to face the challenges of the range of skills described by the Standards? How can we demonstrate that the arts, valuable in and of themselves, are also a way for celebrating our accomplishments and coping with our difficulties — whether they be

in or out of school — with our friends, families, and communities.

The majority of educators standing in front of secondary school classes today are not facing self-identifying readers, poets and writers. Even if a minority of students do see themselves as creative artists (writers, poets, media makers), most are disconnected from contemporary classics and even from compelling young adult works. Beyond the literacy consequences of this disconnection in terms of addressing the Standards and standardized test demands, these adolescents are at a crucial juncture in terms of their evolving self-definition as adults in relationships, in work, and in society. They require an accessible syntax to concretize emotional turmoil as they forge ahead to define themselves.

My quest as a teacher, consultant, poet, professional developer and educator of teachers is to develop approaches that bring students the joy of living a literate life. Given my own development as someone who uses poetry as the vehicle for self-definition, I have found ways to create opportunities for others to do the same. Poetry as

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pedagogy can be used by any teacher to help move students from disconnected readers to excited, engaged and reflective individuals. My goal is to have students find the joy in creative expression through the arts, so that they begin to create for themselves, in the classroom and beyond.

Most disaffected students do not grow up experiencing literature as I did. With that in mind, I authored a poem dealing with one student's negative literacy experience:

Life, Literacy, and . . .

When he walked into the library,
it was so big and clean and beautiful
he felt like he was going to
receive his lottery prize.

But when he found the book the teacher had assigned,
There were so many words he had never seen before
he felt like someone had reached into his pocket
and stolen his prize-winning ticket.

The library became a giant locked safe
With all the riches of the world
Stored alphabetically, on the shelves.
But he didn't know the combination.

He handed the librarian the book
with his library card tucked inside.
Transaction completed,
she handed both back with a smile.

But when he thought she wasn't looking
He scratched an obscenity on the counter
in large letters
and put the book
he knew he was never going to read
on top of his disappointment . . .

And left.

— Lindamichelle Baron

I use this poem to directly engage and “speak to” students — particularly students who struggle with literacy skills. Teachers can, of course, choose from an infinite range of topics and themes which directly speak to the specific student population experience. Here is how I proceed:

Step One: Reading and/or Enacting a Poem as Dramatically as Possible

With a poem such as the above, students can be selected to “act out” the scene, playing the student and the librarian. I read it with as much street cadence as I can muster as a female senior citizen from another world. Interestingly, the poem seems to give me “street cred” as far as my student audiences, who do not care about my credentials as a literacy educator. It is the poetry that is seemingly connected to their world view that allows them to hear me.

Step Two: Close Reading

Students are asked to think about the adolescent’s perspective. This is the *close reading component*: “a careful and purposeful rereading of a text. It’s an encounter with the text where students really focus on what the author had to say, what the author’s purpose was, what the words mean, and what the structure of the text tells us” (Fisher, 2012).

I might ask text-dependent questions. These questions require the student to refer explicitly back to the text (Student Achievement Partners, 2012). For example:

- Which words or lines provide any information about the adolescent in the poem?
- What does the text tell us about him? What do the words tell us about his thoughts about reading?
- What does the individual in the poem tell us is *important* to him?
- Do the words *tell us directly* or do we infer?

Infer is a difficult word, so this moment will present an opportunity to teach or reinforce past teachings about important academic vocabulary (Instructional Shift 6: Building Transferable Vocabulary). This word is both abstract and crosses curriculum areas.

With these close reading questions, I may add some that are not — that is, they are geared to engaging the student at a personal level:

- What questions or thoughts come to your mind as a reader and listener?
- Have you had a reaction to feeling like you can’t do something that you want to — something that’s important to you?

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Step Three: Rereading and Exploring

The poem is read again, and students are asked to discuss its nuances with each other. I guide their discussions with one or two broad questions. They talk with each other about their own questions and thoughts. Through this student discussion, the reluctant students begin to identify aspects of the personally applicable position, arguments, and actions of the poetry persona. Students are drawn into a discussion and conversation about the viewpoints of the adolescent in the poem.

Then I explain that the author of the poem is a female educator over 40 who loves reading and trains teachers and students in literacy. I ask:

- Why do you think the author decided to write a poem about a student who leaves his library book behind and scratches an obscenity on the counter?

Other questions might be pointing to solutions:

- What are some ways a student can talk to a teacher when feeling frustrated?
- What would help you build your skills and confidence as a reader and writer?

I address students who are not habitual readers or writers. Some of these students are deliberately and proudly “oppositional” to the traditional literacy exercises and test-driven curriculum. While they may be disconnected from the curriculum, through this poem and others — they become engaged. What I’ve noticed, as I work with students who are considered to be achieving at a low-level, is that questions aimed at the higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy are often more effective. For example: What was the librarian’s likely reaction when she lifted up the book and found the obscenity? How might she have reacted if the student had shared his issue with her? I am inevitably surprised, every time, by students’ responses to poetic expression.

Step Four: Writing

Students are asked to write their own responses — in prose, argument, dialogue or poetry format. Some deliberately choose to react from two or more perspectives: student, librarian, teacher and even custodial worker who has to remove the obscenity. Within an hour or so, this profile of an angry young library user has created a community of literacy issue conversationalists. From here we can shift the conversation to engaging with building literacy skills for both personal expression and success in life.

Poetry has the power to connect students over a broad spectrum of prior experience. Young people can talk to us in authentic, creative voices and engage in intellectual discourse when we provide the opportunities. They can call on their insights, intellect and enthusiasm. When we provide the opportunity in the classroom, they will respond from the depth of who they are. It's doable and achievable for all — one student-relevant poem at a time.



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