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Poetry Text Set Analysis

Of all the topics and concepts I teach, there is one that I find particularly daunting, both due to its complexity as well as the fact that many students balk at its name: poetry. Even teachers with decades' worth of experience can approach this topic with some hesitation, as it is an aspect of our content area that receives very little attention in university teacher training programs. This is part of the reason I have selected poetry as the topic for my text set analysis. While I have been teaching a poetry unit for the past six years, it has taken on several forms. When I first taught it, I was teaching in a school which followed Common Core State Standards; however, after three years, I had moved on to a school that follows the International Baccalaureate (IB) framework. Due to this drastic change, I had to rethink how I approached poetry in terms of the IB's inquiry-based approach. Another reason poetry is a fitting topic is that it so easily lends itself to a multitude of texts. Poetry can encompass songs, video, photos, spoken word, and written texts. It can also be written about virtually anything and in a wide variety of formats.

Poetry is studied at one point or another by virtually every student. However, the way poetry is introduced can often be stale, an offense of which I too have been guilty. Students are handed a poetry anthology that weighs as much as the rest of their textbooks combined, and they are asked to read, dissect and reflect on the words within - many of the words having been written by dead, white men. While I do love many 'classic' poems, I want to facilitate a poetic experience for my students where they can hear and understand that poetry is not just about analyzing a print

text. Poetry is meant to be heard and experienced. For this reason, I want to introduce my students to spoken word poetry, sometimes known as ‘slam poetry.’ Spoken word poems are often written about the poet’s life experiences or issues that occur in our society. They provide students with a poem with which they can likely relate. The spoken word poem I chose as my text is entitled *Famous*, written by Hillary Kobernick. In her reading, Kobernick exudes such passion and belief in her words, and I want my students to see that poetry is not just dry metaphors typed on a page; it is something to be experienced, to be heard, and to be felt.

My next choice for a poetry text was inspired by one of the MAED courses in which I was enrolled last semester. In this adolescent literature course, we were asked to read a verse novel in order to consider our teaching of poetry. Initially, I have to be honest, the idea of reading an entire novel’s worth of poetry had me filled with dread. After reading *Inside Out and Back Again* by Thanhha Lai, however, I completely changed my tune. The reason I want to expose my students to a verse novel is that it demonstrates yet another way poetry can be experienced. Oftentimes, we think of a poem as a page or so of text dedicated to one simple topic; love, loss, nature. Verse novels show readers that poetry can, in fact, tell a story just as holistically and thoroughly as a prose novel. Through the protagonist, Kim Hà, and her story of hardship, discrimination and new beginnings following her family’s relocation to America during the Vietnam War, students can clearly understand that poetry does not have to be a one-off kind of text; it can support the richness of narratives as well.

The previously proposed texts have offered students the opportunity to listen and read. I also want to offer students the chance to create, as this is a fundamental aspect of poetry. While students will, of course, create many of their own poems throughout the unit, there is something

special and engaging about creating blackout poetry. In the past, I have taught blackout poetry as a collaboration with our school's art teacher. It is the perfect blend of the art of language and visual arts, and it demonstrates how these media can work in concert with one another in order to create something completely beautiful and unique. For my final text, I plan to use the Scholastic website's blackout poetry post to display some examples for my students. Not only does the website have examples of blackout poems, ranging from colorful intricacy to black-and-white simplicity, but it also provides students with step-by-step suggestions on how to begin a blackout poem. I have found in previous years that beginning to create the poem is the most difficult part for students in the creative process. Once they have chosen a path for their poem to take, they feel much more comfortable taking risks. A text such as this would give students a safe place to start their work.

While there are several pedagogical reasons for choosing the above texts, part of their selection is also due to my personality as well as the personalities and preferences of my students. Though English was always my favorite subject when I was in school, I was also in my school's choir and several of our musical theater productions. My love for creative performance has definitely seeped into my teaching practice. My students are often in front of the class either reading poems they wrote, or performing an adaptation of a short story we read. I believe there is so much value in students taking creative risks in English courses, which is why I wanted to highlight spoken word poetry and blackout poems in my unit. Each of these forms of expression have an obvious focus on literacy, but they also give students a chance to exhibit their unique ideas and creativity through language. The grade 6 students in my class this year also excel when given the freedom to "color outside the lines." Performing spoken word poetry or designing their own

blackout poem would give them the perfect chance to do so. Additionally, I am very fortunate to have a group of students who love reading and want nothing more than to disappear into a good book. I would not have chosen the verse novel *Inside Out and Back Again* for every group that I've taught; however, my sixth graders cannot get enough of new stories. They love to read them, discuss them, and recommend them. Showing the narrative capabilities of poetry would help engage them in the topic.

While these texts lend themselves nicely to the teaching and learning styles within my classroom, I also believe that they work in tandem to illustrate the different layers poetry has. The majority of poetry instruction becomes a “rigid practice,” one which cages students’ creativity and unfairly represents all that poetry can be (Juzwik, et. al., 2017). By showing my students poetry as performance, as text, and as visual art, I can share the multitudes of ways that people can use language to express themselves. I can use poetry to “center the different ways diverse peoples use language; the values attached to these practices...what these differences and diversities mean and how they interact in the world” (Juzwik, et. al., 2017). This focus lends itself especially well to an IB framework. Students can question why poetry takes on so many forms, how these forms were chosen by specific groups, and how do we experience these different forms as readers and creators of text?

My final rationale for selecting these specific texts errs more on the side of practicality. I am currently teaching in Japan, and if one watches the news, one is already aware that all of the schools in Japan are closed for several weeks due to the COVID-19 virus outbreak. Because of this closure, my school will be engaging in an online learning program until April. When I heard I would need to introduce poetry to my students from a remote location, I initially panicked. How

can I reach my students and keep them engaged in something if we are not even in the same room together? The texts I have chosen are all very visual or auditory. Spoken word poetry can be watched at home, blackout poetry can be viewed and enjoyed online. Even the verse novel I selected I have considered turning into an ‘audiobook read-aloud’ of sorts; me, recording myself reading the text and sending the audio file to my students. Each of these texts can also generate a fair amount of discussion, such as VanDeWeghe’s suggested “questioning the author” (2007). Through our online learning program, I can share the texts with my students and pose questions in a virtual format with students responding through platforms such as Flipgrid, a site where they can record video responses and reply to one another. While the texts I have chosen are already multimodal forms of instruction, our remote locations would also allow students to integrate different forms of literacy, reading, writing and talking, into their practice. This is fitting for a poetry unit especially, as “talk motivates writing, or vice-versa - one follows the other” (VanDeWeghe, 2007). I am optimistic that though we are not together, the texts I have selected will encourage their curiosity and creativity.

While poetry itself is not necessarily always complex, finding ways to engage students in it often is. Some of the texts I have chosen are familiar to me, but the ways in which I plan to use them, especially in Japan’s current teaching situation, make me feel re-energized in teaching this topic. It is my hope that by integrating this variety of texts into my poetry unit I can help students see poetry comes in many forms for us to read, listen to and create. I hope that they will help foster a sense of creativity and excitement in my students, so they can go to future classes and, instead of dreading poetry, look forward to it.

References

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