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Pioneers! O Pioneers! Exploring Ambiguity and Creativity within High School Poetry Pedagogy

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Exploring Ambiguity and Creativity within High School Poetry Pedagogy

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For we cannot tarry here,
We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger,
We, the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

- Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

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Abstract

This project began my senior year of high school when my favorite AP English teacher told me that he didn't like poetry. I left his class confident in my prose-writing and analytical skills, intent on majoring in English at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In my freshman-year creative writing class, I read radical poetry—the poetry of Jack Spicer, George Oppen, Sylvia Plath, Amiri Baraka—that confused, fascinated, and ultimately inspired me to apply to the creative writing program. I also decided, around this time, to become a high school English teacher. This project took form as I struggled to find a place within my education classes and practicum for the exciting poetry and student-based lessons that I was experiencing in my poetry workshops. I found myself repeatedly confronting, within the world of secondary English Language Arts education, the apprehension that my high school teacher expressed about teaching poetry.

I began this project with the intent of identifying and exploring the importance of including poetry in the high school English Language Arts curriculum. I wanted to design a unit that would serve as a resource to wary teachers—I wanted to give them something that would make poetry less "scary," more comfortable. I began my research by reading all that I could find—everything from lesson plans, to pedagogical theory, to the Common Core State Standards—about how and why to teach poetry in high schools. My research shifted to practical observation and experience as I began spending time observing and teaching in schools throughout Boulder Valley. This fall, I am student teaching at East High School in Denver, Colorado. I am working with both a general English Language Arts and a creative writing teacher. I am in the classroom, as a teacher and observer, full time, five days a week, for the duration of the semester.

This project is a culmination of my theoretical reading, hypothetical planning, and practical experience. As I moved through the various stages of thinking, planning and teaching, my focus moved from making poetry less "scary" to exploring such apprehension and nervousness. My central question changed from "How can I prove that poetry is necessary, safe and approachable?" to "How can I prove that poetry is necessary because it is not safe, but ambiguous and challenging?"

My project is composed of two parts: first, an essay that explores key debates and fundamental practices within poetry pedagogy; and second, a six week poetry unit plan. I do not intend to prescribe—through my suggested methodology and plans—a single, simple way of teaching poetry. Instead, this project is my effort to embody in my planning and teaching the vulnerable, creative, and critical processes with which I expect my students to engage in my classroom. My hope is that this project can serve as a resource for other teachers looking for new ways of understanding poetry, teaching, and the greater purposes of education.

Pioneers! O pioneers!
Exploring Ambiguity and Creativity within High School Poetry Pedagogy

After spending a year thinking about teaching poetry, I was surprised by my nervousness the morning of my first lesson. I was teaching three Langston Hughes poems. My plan was to begin by allowing students to experience and comment on the poem on their own terms, and respond by writing their own "dream" poems, incorporating both abstract and concrete dreams, since this is what we were examining in Hughes' work. I was startled to realize that despite my thorough lesson planning, despite my unbreakable passion for poetry, and despite the thirty-page paper sitting on my laptop about the personal, social, and academic importance of teaching poetry at the high school level, I was terrified. As students walked into the classroom and began perusing the poems on their desks, I realized that my goal in studying effective poetry pedagogy—that my goal in actually teaching poetry—could never be to overcome the fear and uncertainty that surrounds the teaching of poetry. I will never make poetry "safe" or easy, nor do I care to. I suddenly realized that teaching poetry effectively is always inevitably uncomfortable. It is, by nature, uncertain. It is necessarily terrifying, because it insists on vulnerability—on a tolerance for ambiguity—of both student and teacher. There is nothing more terrifying than standing in front of a group of thirty-five sixteen-year-old students, not knowing exactly what is going to happen. Yet it is exactly this that we—as English Language Arts teachers—are called to do. By stepping into the uncomfortable space that is poetry instruction, we join our students in exactly the practices that we wish them to enact: the practices of thinking critically, of asking difficult questions, of responding to complexity with an attitude of inquiry.

I find inspiration for teaching from theorists such as John Dewey and Paulo Freire, for whom education is the practice of such inquiry. From the very beginning of my teacher training program, I was drawn into the critical pedagogy movement, by which education is meant to teach student to think, to ask questions, to challenge the expected and assumed and construct a personal and socially relevant understanding of the world. At the center of critical pedagogy is a tolerance for multiplicity, and it is such a tolerance that makes poetry so necessary in the high school classroom. Poetry, as I have come to understand it, is distinct from prose in its embrace of the connotative and conversational existence of language, in which every word speaks on multiple levels to every other. The poem requires the reader to hold and play with questions and to think critically about the implications that simultaneous and competing meanings have on the poem. Poetry is effective and necessary in the classroom because it requires from students the critical engagement, the practice of inquiry, and the ability to deconstruct and reconstruct meaning, that is central to the overall intent of education that I adhere to, and that which guides the Common Core State Standards and curriculum design around the country.

Since poetry requires that students embrace uncertainty and ambiguity, it is only fair that the teaching of poetry must require the same of the teacher—hence, my nervousness when teaching Langston Hughes. Teaching poetry requires us, as educators, to ask questions that lead only to more questions. We must allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to not know the answer. As poets and teachers Jack Collom and Sheryl Noethe so emphatically reminds us, in words and action, we must write with our students! (Collom, Noethe 9). Our methodology must be as radical, as full of inquiry and possibility and uncertainty, as the poems we read. In his poem/pedagogical manifesto,

Jake Adam York—poet and director of Creative Writing at The University of Colorado at Denver—writes:

> Each poem is a radius, and a radical. It must reach at its own angle. It must grow its way through its soil. It must attend to its environment, and we must attend to its growth, allowing it to reach for us, to show us how to perceive change, and how to change with it. (York 246)

If we want out students to understand poetry as a relevant, interactive, living manifestation of language, then we must allow it to live and breathe in the classroom. It took a few Langston Hughes poems and a bit of pre-lesson nerves for me to realize that my goal never has and never will be to make poetry easy or understandable. I don't want to prescribe a set of infallible lessons to other nervous teachers. I originally wanted to help teachers become less "afraid" of poetry. I don't want that anymore. I want to explore the importance of poetry in the secondary classroom, on the standards-based academic, social and personal levels. I want to suggest one way of approaching a poetry unit that involves both formal understanding and personal response. Ultimately, I want to encourage teachers to approach poetry in the classroom with courage, meeting the unanswerable head on, with the noble intent of embracing all the complexity and possibility within.

Poetry in the Classroom

Studies on arts integrated education consistently suggest that students participating in the arts in school engage and perform better in their classes than those students who do not. In a study performed in several secondary schools throughout

Greeley, CO, Mark Montemayor and Connie Stewart from the University of Northern Colorado found that students in arts classes valued all of their classes more than students in non-arts classes (Montemayor 2). Not only do students participating in the arts tend to value their education more than students not participating; they also tend to perform better. In a study of 25,000 secondary school students, James Catterall links engagement in the arts in school to academic achievement, specifically in reading. Catterall found that students in eighth and tenth grade performed higher in English and reading than their non-arts peers. Such studies suggest that there is benefit to the creative arts beyond an increased ability to connect with others or express emotion and identity. There is an academic advantage to teaching the arts in schools—the arts teach students to comprehend and to think. The arts allow students to approach a work—be it a painting, a sculpture, or a poem—without looking for a single "answer," but rather for the new ways of thinking. The arts teach students to inquire. If the ultimate goal of education is to create critical, thinking, well-prepared citizens of our communities who are able to tackle complex social and personal issues with understanding and compassion, then the arts are necessary because they approach the student at the level of inquiry—where there is no single interpretation, "answer" or response, but rather a challenge to step into conversation.

We may consider poetry both fine art and literature, and it is this duality that makes it highly effective and empowering in the classroom. Poetry is literature, on a most basic level, because it is comprised of words and speaks into the thousand-year-old literary conversation that we enter into in the English Language Arts classroom. There is significant overlap both in form and device between poetry and literary prose. Students

who learn metaphor through poetry can apply metaphor in prose. Similarly, students can use what they know about figurative language from prose to explore poetry. Poetry does not always reveal answers or work linearly, but works creatively and unconventionally to explore multiple meanings. Through reading and writing poetry, students access both the academic, analytical aspect of critical literary studies—close reading, identifying and determining the effect of figurative language, etc.—as well as the artistic, emotional, expressive and metaphorical aspect associated with creative and fine art studies. As a link between standard English Language Arts education and arts integration, poetry can function effectively in the classroom, as a way to both increase engagement in learning by making the content personal and creative, and increase achievement by teaching students to notice language on a deeper, more intricate level.

Intent of the Poetry Unit/Workshop

The debate over how to teach poetry—and whether to teach poetry at all—is a fundamental debate amongst high school English Language Arts teachers. In a study of 530 articles from *English Journal* from 1912 to 2005, Mark Dressman and colleagues at the University of Georgia found that the discussion of poetry in the secondary classroom centered on the debate between the formalist and populist approaches to reading, writing and teaching poetry (Dressman 2). On one side, educators argue for the formalist approach—or New Critical approach, as it was known following the publication of John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book by the same name—where poems are regarded as entities of detailed and figurative language, to be read for the sake of the language itself rather than

for the reader's emotional response. The formalist approach survives most strongly in University literature classrooms, where a frequent emphasis on "close reading" requires the reader/writer to closely examine and comment on the linguistic elements (word choice, literary devices, etc) of the text and these elements' effect on meaning. In the high school classroom, the formalist approach guides teachers to teach poetic and literary devices (alliteration, enjambment, rhyme, etc.) as well as form (sonnet, sestina, haiku, limerick, etc.), with the intent of teaching poetry as a structurally and linguistically complex art form. The formalist approach to poetry succeeds in the classroom when it moves students to notice nuances of language on a more intricate level than they have ever before. It falters when the emphasis on device, meter, and form makes the actual writing of poetry seem impossible or irrelevant to students' lives. Many students have a hard time recognizing dactylic pentameter, and when this is the extent of their study, they learn to hate poetry, or at the very least, view it as unimportant.

The opposing argument among English teachers is that the poem, once written, is the property of the reader, and can be interpreted and re-interpreted a number of ways; the poem can be the subject of any number of writing exercises, imitations, and parodies. Regarded by Dressman as the populist approach, and by other critics and educators as the reader response approach, this philosophy on teaching poetry focuses on reader response and appreciation of the poem, as well as the identity of the writer (and the readers connection with this identity). In her book, *Reader Response Criticism,* author and theorist Jane Tompkins describes reader response theory as a turning of focus from the text to the reader. She writes, "reader response critics would argue that a poem cannot be understood apart from its results" (Tompkins ix). The populist or reader response teacher

might have students write a response or imitation poem of Ashbery, rather than an essay on his use of repetition and juxtapositions. The populist approach is seen in the University poetry workshop setting, when students are asked to write poems in response to other poems, or to consider and imitate the emotional response that the poem enacts on the reader. Formalists criticize the populist approach for "trivializing poetry and language study" (Dressman 3), for asking so many questions of poems so as to let enough doubt enter to reduce the regard of poetry as fine art. The populist approach makes all poems—Shakespeare's sonnets and children's haikus—fair game for analysis, critique, and imitation. Suddenly, the definition of poetry begins to waver and crumble. Students begin to write poems without actually knowing what enjambment is. It begins to matter more what a student thinks of a poem than whether or not they can identify all the places where the poet employed assonance. The reader response approach succeeds when students begin to understand poetry as an active, living part of our world with a tangible impact on the community (be it social, political or personal), and they begin to see themselves as poets and writers. The accusation is that in this process, a piece of the mystery and sacredness of poetry is lost, as well at the rigor. By exclusively looking at the emotional, personal impact of the poem, students fail to develop an ability to talk intelligently about (and write with) the finer nuances of language with which the poem is working.

Though they are often taught as such, I argue that the reader response and formalist approaches are not mutually exclusive. Close reading for formal poetic device does not necessarily exclude analysis of the context and social relevance of the poem or the significance of the poems effect on the reader. That the poem functions on one level as words interacting on the page, does not mean that it does not act on another level with

the reader. Indeed, poems act on many levels—as performance, as independent works of language, as conversations with each other and with the reader. The formalist approach of looking closely at the way the poet uses language ultimately serves the reader response approach of examining the effect of the poem on its audience. Similarly, the effect a poem has on the reader can guide students to examine more closely the way that language functions to create such an effect. Ultimately, linking both approaches will allow students to better understand the specific, detailed, nuanced ways that language can be used to have an actual impact on the reader.

I read poems very sparingly in high school. The only time I distinctly remember focusing on poetry for more than half a lesson was during my senior year AP Literature class. An incredible teacher taught this class—one who somehow managed to turn even the most technical literary term into the most relevant and useful device to carry around. I found myself understanding how, when and why to speak in parallelisms and how to correctly discuss irony. However, when we got to the poetry unit, he spoke the unthinkable: "class, I hate to admit it," he told us, "but I'm with you on this one. I really just don't like poetry." Throughout the unit, we spent one day reading sonnets and an awkwardly enjoyable day that he called "dirty poetry day" where we read indirectly lewd romantic poetry written by very old (very dead) men. We never wrote a poem.

I do not believe I am alone in this experience. As a high school student, and later as a pre-service teacher, I have repeatedly encountered teachers that avoid poetry all together, or include small amounts of poetry in larger units based on novels or literary themes. The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts demand that students read, analyze and respond to poetry at points in their academic career (see CCSS

RL.9-10.10.) but beyond this obligation, very few teachers that I have encountered have expressed interest in teaching literary poetry. The most common reasons I have heard while working with students as a student and as a pre-service teacher are:

- I don't *get* poetry. I don't know how to read it. I don't know how to write it. So how am I supposed to teach it?

- I have a hard time finding good poems to teach. I don't read poetry, so I never know where to go to find good poems.

- I am just not a poetry person.

It is not necessarily underprepared or inexperienced teachers that do not care to teach poetry. Many effective teachers, who motivate students to perform well within the class and are passionate about developing student appreciation for literature, are apprehensive about teaching poetry. According to the study by Dressman et. al., the discussion of poetry amongst teachers of the English Language Arts has nearly silenced since the 1960s. Teachers—at least in Colorado—are not required to take a class on teaching creative writing before obtaining their teaching licensure. Other than the occasional *English Journal* article on spoken word or multimedia poetry, the discussion of how and why to teach poetry has nearly disappeared (Dressman 3), replaced, if at all, by the question of poetry's general relevance in the classroom.

All to say that there is significant disagreement within the world of English Language Arts education about whether to teach poetry at all in the high school classroom. Some argue that poetry should be taught as supplementary text to support students' understanding of other content. Some teachers will teach Whitman with nature/self-exploration texts such as *Siddhartha* or *Into the Wild*, or *Poe* as a fun reprieve

around Halloween. Other teachers will design quick poetry units aimed at "getting through it together," as was my experience in high school.

My intent here, and in the subsequent lesson plans and materials, is to introduce to the high school English Language Arts classroom a poetry unit that balances the formalist techniques of close reading and attention to linguistic detail with the populist or reader response approach of focusing on effect and context by responding through imitation and creative exercise. My intent is to construct a methodology of teaching poetry that both honors poetry as fine and complex art and empowers students as writers and critics of their own original work, and that introduces students into the contemporary conversation of poets in our community. My ultimate goal is to adapt the structure of the college poetry workshop—with its fine balance of poetry analysis, classic as well as contemporary models, in-class writing and peer review—to the high school classroom. Through a contained unit of reading, writing and revising poetry, I hope to introduce patterns of thinking, reading and writing that are useful for students and teachers beyond the study of poetry. As Dressman writes, "the development of proficiency in the use of poetic forms of language and expression is not a luxury, but it is an integral aspect of the increasingly wide range of literary skills and practices that students will be using in the 21st century" (Dressman 7). It is my firm belief and experience that poetry has the potential to empower students as writers and thinkers by leading them to question the world around them, to strive toward ambiguity, metaphor, and all other artful nuances that make language something alive, messy and powerful. Poetry reminds students why we study language in the first place: because language is not rote but vivid, not dead but creating and defining our lives as we live them.

To Begin with a Poetry Idea

In his book, *Rose, Where Did You Get that Red?*, Kenneth Koch argues for the teaching of "poetry ideas" as a way of linking complex, traditional "adult" poems to students' lives and their own personal, exploratory writing. Koch explains that teachers should not shy away from "adult poems"—from the works of Blake or Whitman or Rilke—but instead discover within these poems an "idea" or "feeling" that the poem is exploring. Koch's method of teaching the poetry idea involves identifying a question that the poem is asking, or way that the poem is functioning to express to or converse with the reader, which students can apply to their own writing. Koch writes, "I wanted my students to find and recreate in themselves the main feelings of the adult poems…while they wrote, I let the poetry idea take over from the adult poem, and their own ideas lead them in various directions." (Koch x1-x1v). The intent of the poetry idea is to allow students to experience a poem—to make sense of how the poem is working—before they are required to know or say anything "intelligent" about the work (x1viii). The poetry idea makes poetry accessible by inviting students into an exploration or conversation in which they have as much ability to speak as the "adult" poet. The success of the poetry idea framework is founded on the belief that students will invest themselves in poetry when they come to view poetry as a way of understanding, relating to, and engaging in the world personally as well as analytically. When students read "adult poems"—by which Koch refers to poems often taught in schools, or written by poets with training and experience that exceeds that of the student—and begin the sense-making process by

looking at how the poem functions in relation to the world, students begin to interact with poetry. The poem is no longer beyond the student, because it is speaking to an idea that they can also speak to.

Koch demonstrates his use of the poetry idea as a guide for student understanding and writing in his lesson on Wallace Stevens' poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at A Blackbird." He begins the lesson by presenting the poem to the class, both visually and orally (it is always a good idea to read the poem aloud and play a recording of the poet, if possible). The students respond to the poem initially by journaling or raising their hands and sharing their first impressions.[1] After allowing students space to respond freely to the poem, Koch directs attention toward the "poetry idea" by asking students to look at what the poem is *doing*. When faced with a poem, many students will immediately try to explain what the poem is "about." Koch's lessons challenge students to focus instead on *how* the poem functions: Is the poem asking a question? Is the poem expressing a particular emotion? Is the poem describing an experience or object? Is the poem challenging expected ways of seeing or traditional ways of thinking? In this case, the poem is presenting an ordinary object—a blackbird—in several different ways. To present the "poetry idea," Koch rephrases the way that that the poem is functioning as a writing prompt for students: "Write a poem in which you talk about the same thing in a number of different ways" (86). In this way, students identify a main project or function of the poem and respond by entering into a conversation with the poet through their own writing.

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[1] I often begin discussions of poems by asking the class, "in what way is this a 'poem?'" This question leads into a discussion of the specific way the poet makes meaning, as well as a continued exploration of the definition of "poetry"—which my own unit intends more to explode than to refine.

Koch offers another example of applying the poetry idea in the classroom in his lesson on William Carlos Williams' "This is Just to Say." Koch explains that he chose this poem for his students because he wanted to give his students "an example of a poet who wrote in ordinary language about ordinary things" (100). He guided the initial discussion about the poem by asking students "if they liked the short lines, and if they liked the poem being so small and about just one thing." After hearing students' responses, Koch introduced the poetry idea that he wanted students to consider in the context of Williams writing, and apply to their own: "apologize for something you're really secretly glad you did." This poetry idea encompasses the content of Williams' poem, and provides a possible reason for many of the technical choices that Williams' made, such as his use of enjambment, the short line and direct address. As such, this poetry idea serves as a guide for students as they think not only about *how* Williams' language functions, but also *why* he chose to use language in this way. The following poem is one that Koch's students wrote in response to Williams:

Dear Cat

Please
for
give
me
for
watching
your
eyes
gleam
in
the
night.
                    Lorraine Fedison, 6th grade   (105)

This poem indicates an understanding both of the major poetry idea Koch presented, as well as Williams use of simple words and short lines. As with his lesson on "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Koch's lesson on "This is Just to Say," worked to bring students in to conversation with an "adult" poet about a poetry idea, by engaging them in similar processes and strategies of writing as the poet (see page 59 for my lesson plan inspired by Williams' "This is Just to Say" and Koch's corresponding lesson).

Koch's lessons are designed for students of the elementary grades. As stated previously, Koch ultimately lets the poetry idea "take over from the adult poem" and guide student writing for the remainder of the lesson. The "poetry idea" functions effectively, but differently for students of the secondary grades. As for elementary students, high school students can use the "poetry idea" as a way of making sense of the overall project of the poem. The "poetry idea" establishes an idea or question to which the poem is speaking that high school students can take and investigate through their own writing. Yet whereas Koch lets the "poetry idea take over from the adult poem during lessons with younger students," the same cannot be done for students of the upper grades. For high school students, the poetry idea serves as a lens through which students can return to the poem and consider the specific ways in which the poet uses language. It is in this return to the poem that the processes of close reading and formal analysis take place, supported and therefore made more effective, by the guiding "poetry idea."

For example, in adapting Koch's lesson on "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" to a high school classroom, the presentation of the poetry idea—"Write a poem in which you talk about the same thing in a number of different ways" (86)—necessitates a return to the poem, in which students look closely at the ways in which

Stevens' language works to present, re-present, and question the single thing—the blackbird. Stevens divides his poem into thirteen sections and presents the blackbird differently in each section in terms of both content and form. After identifying the poetry idea, students will look carefully at the way that Stevens changes the form of the poem with each section, and will consider how this alteration adds to the impact or meaning of the poem. Stevens also uses repetition throughout the poem—repetition of "blackbird" throughout the entire poem, but also repetition within each section. There are many ways of interpreting the intent and effect of this repetition—one might argue that the repetition establishes connections between the blackbird and the other characters or objects in the poem—but, regardless of interpretation, as they closely analyze language in the context of the poetry idea, students will be making connections between the literary device and its purpose in the poem.

Although the ability to read and comprehend a poem is deemed necessary and included in the Common Core State Standards—CCSS: RL.9-10.10 says that students will "read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems"—it is important to focus not only on *what* the poem is about or what it is trying to say, but also *how* the poet creates meaning in the poem. The intent of the poetry idea in both the elementary and secondary classroom is to identify something that the poem is trying to do that the student can also do, and that is relevant to their lives and experience. The poetry idea guides the high school student to return to the poem for close reading and analysis, to identify specific ways that languages works in the poem. Thus, students engage in analysis through a lens that directly influences their own writing; students enter into conversation with the poem by applying both the poetry idea and the formal strategies

and techniques employed by the poet. When this connection is made—and students realize *why* a poet includes alliteration or stanza breaks, and how these elements impact the poem—the poem suddenly becomes relevant and accessible, both as subject for analysis and as inspiration for their own writing.

In the following lessons, I use the poetry idea to link reader response practices of emphasizing the initial and valid emotional response that students have to a poem, with formal practices of close reading and analysis. My poetry lessons begin by approaching poems through the lens of a specific poetry idea. Students will read a poem, look for an overarching—though by no means singular—way that the poem is functioning, then return to the poem to identify specific ways that language facilitates this project. After reacting and analyzing the poem, they will write poems based on the poetry idea and the language strategies found in the poem. The intent of such a structure is to present poems as conversational entities that function as sense-makers or question-askers within a greater context in which students can also speak, and do so through a creative and masterful play with language. Of the success of the poetry idea, Koch writes:

> They were learning what great poetry had to do with them. Feelings that they may have thought were silly or too private to be understood by anyone else were subjects that great authors wrote about. (xxviii)

Such is the intent of my lessons—to make poetry a viable form of expression for students while also enabling students to make sense of and write personally expressive, creative and formally complex poetry.

 A Note on the High School Student

One dilemma that I find when developing creative writing curriculum for the high school classroom is that there is a gap in the pedagogical literature between the elementary grades and the college workshop. There is a natural creativity and spontaneity in children in the lower grades that makes these students an easy target for poetry instruction. Give third-graders an object to write about—such as a peach or a pencil—and they will inevitably come up with delightful and surprising metaphors. This is not immediately true for students of the secondary grades, who have often become more accustomed to linear and logical ways of writing, or have come to view poetry as strictly an emotional outlet. One fear that many teachers express to me—and that I, too, often confront—is that students will inevitably write melodramatic, hyper-emotional poetry. I have encountered this dilemma in most of the poetry lessons I have taught at the high school level. In most poetry lessons, I will have one or two students write a poem that focuses on heavy emotions such as sadness and depression. When I talk to these students about the emotions they are uncovering (since we, as teachers and mandatory reporters, cannot let these emotions or concerns go unnoticed), they generally explain that they, themselves, are not depressed, but that they "just wrote a sad poem." On one hand, poetry might and should offer students support and a safe place to share their feelings and the problems that are going on in their lives. On the other hand, I fear that some students write hyper-emotional poetry because that is what they think that poetry is. Whatever the cause, students' propensity for writing hyper-emotional poetry, oftentimes not grounded in concrete images, is no excuse for excluding poetry from the high school curriculum; in fact, it is all the more reason to teach poetry. As teachers, it is our project to give students the means to express emotion and strong opinion in ways that are unique, intelligent, and

concrete rather than cliché and melodramatic, and also to show students that there are purposes for poetry beyond emotional expression. Poetry should challenge students' thinking by getting them to look at functions of language that they have never considered—such as Koch's idea of using poetry to look at a single object in many different ways. By learning different techniques of language—such as enjambment and alliteration—students begin to use language itself to more effectively and thoroughly explore ideas. Students realize the power of language when they discover that such techniques of language create meaning—that they can intentionally design sound and form to convey meaning in a poem in a way that is unique and complex. The following exercise might help students channel any hyper-emotional tendencies into innovative, image-filled poems:

Have students write an emotional, angst-filled poem.[2] Then have them take that emotion and write about it using only images, without using any of the emotional words of the original poem. The point of this exercise is to explore concrete, ways of expressing emotion that help make poetry more accessible and tangible for the reader. If successful, such an exercise will help students work through their emotions by guiding them to think about them in a new way.

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[2] When setting students off to write angst-filled poetry—or any poetry, for that matter—it is wise to have an honest talk about our requirements as mandatory reporters. My experience is that the potential for uncovering serious and reportable emotional and life struggles is higher during a poetry unit. However, the likelihood of reporting students who are truly in a healthy mental and emotional state, but just wrote a "sad poem" is lessened by honest conversations about the result of such writing, as well as examples of poetry that functions in alternative, equally engaging ways.

The second fear that causes many high school teachers to be apprehensive about poetry, especially when they share a similar sentiment, is that students will refuse to engage with poetry. Like any topic or genre of literature, there will be some students who find poetry less interesting. However, I find that all students appreciate poetry in some form, even if only as song lyrics. Introduce students to poetry by showing them as many forms of poetry as possible early in the unit. Talk about what distinguishes poetry from prose, and what makes lyrics or slam poetry different from more traditional literary poetry. Make sure that in this process, the goal remains to increase regard for literary poetry, not replace it with other, more immediately "accessible" forms.

Fundamentals for Making the Workshop Work

In order to make a poetry workshop function within the high school classroom — in order for students to read, write and comment on each other's poems effectively— there are fundamental expectations and practices that every teacher must establish in the classroom. Every teacher sets up their classroom differently, with differing amounts of teacher-led instruction, student participation, group work, and independent writing time. This is especially true of the creative writing classroom, where some teachers allow students full periods to write independently, while others provide constant structure, with activities ranging from guided writing, to in-class reading and discussion, to group writing activities. The following five aspects are those that I have found to be necessary regardless of teaching style, with the goal that students will read and discuss published poetry and write and share their own work. The following are especially important for

creating a *workshop* environment, where students are reading and commenting honestly and constructively on each other's work, with the intent of revising their poetry to prepare for publication. In my experience, it is often easier, in the younger grades, to get students to share their work out loud with their peers. High school students can be extremely uncomfortable sharing their work. I find from personal experience teaching high school students and working with other teachers, that creating an environment in which students share their work and offer and accept honest criticism requires deliberate steps toward establishing a safe classroom. The following five aspects—a class culture of accountability, a safe place to share work and make mistakes, a framework for reading and writing poems, a diverse bank of poetry to read, and a comprehensive and clear practice for giving and receiving feedback—are those fundamentals that structure a successful poetry unit. These practices, once established, will aid in the success not only of poetry, but also of other reading and writing units throughout the year.

1: A class culture of accountability

A poetry workshop only functions in the high school classroom if students come to class prepared. Whereas in some classes a lack of preparation might affect individual learning most significantly, in the poetry workshop, failure to come prepared explicitly and negatively impacts the entire class. In the workshop setting, students are expected to write, read and comment on each other's work. If one student fails to complete an assignment, at least one other student will be unable to take part in a vital aspect of the workshop process. In my experience, a lack of preparation is the most challenging

obstacle to making the workshop function effectively in the classroom. Inevitably, some students will come to class without their work, offering a number of excuses. Students most often tell me:

1. That they could not type or print their work because of a computer malfunction.

2. That they had writer's block.

3. That I was not clear enough about the assignment.

On one hand, a teacher can manage a lack of preparation by establishing and strictly implementing a system for bringing in or failing to complete work. Students should get credit for showing up to class having given their honest effort to their assignments. Similarly, students should not get away with coming unprepared. Students' grades should suffer immediately if they fail to complete an assignment or bring their work to class, especially when their incompletion results in a missed opportunity for another student, and even when they offer one of the aforementioned excuses. Failure to come prepared should also never result in the student being allowed to sit or "take it easy" for a day. Prepare for your class by creating a plan of action for unprepared students. One teacher recommended having unprepared students write an apology poem to their teacher and each person in their workshop group explaining why they failed to bring their work, why they are sorry, and how it will not happen again.

While some students respond well to deadlines and grade incentives to come to class prepared, it is ultimately the task of the teacher to establish a class culture of accountability, in which it is unacceptable not to come prepared. In a college writing workshop, students are usually responsible for bringing in copies of their work for everyone in the class when it is their time to workshop. If a student fails to bring work in,

they are often skipped in the workshop rotation. The student misses out on their own opportunity to get feedback from their professor and peers. Yet in the most effective workshop, there is another element of accountability in place by which students feel responsible for caring about and engaging in a community of writers. Students should bring in work because they honor the community of the classroom, the common pursuit of creativity and honesty that is the poetry workshop.

Such a seemingly lofty and intangible goal as a "culture of accountability" can be achieved through concrete and intentional steps in setting up the classroom and the workshop practice. One can begin by designing activities where students read and write together. Collaborative work can help students understand poetry as a community-based activity, rather than something done in solidarity. My "Talking About Poetry" Lesson (see Unit Plan 43) is one example of how students can begin reading, discussing, and writing poems together, but there are infinite ways that students can begin to work collaboratively.

Possibilities for Collaborative/Community Poetry:

- *Exotic corpse poetry*: Each student begins a poem by writing a single line on a sheet of paper. Students then pass their poem to another person, who writes a new line, then folds the paper so that the person they pass to can only see the line that they wrote. Encourage students to write in opposites or to try to write the most unexpected new line they can imagine.
- *One-word poems*: Each student adds one word to the poem as it moves around the room. Again, encourage students to move the poem in an unexpected direction.
- *Choral readings:* Ask students to perform a poem as a group, planning ahead of time what lines each student wants to read for maximum effect.

Teachers can further foster student accountability by strategically assigning workshop groups for students. As much as students might complain about being assigned

to a "random" group without any of their friends, I have found that students generally work more efficiently with students that they know less well. Workshop groups should be assigned strategically, based on ability, writing style/interest, and the social dynamics of the students. Most importantly, students need to read, write and discuss with the people in their workshop group both with and without the supervision of their teacher. The safer students feel with each other, the more they will be able to support and critique each other's writing, and the more they will feel the need to come prepared—not only for the grade, but because there is a community depending on them.

I reinforce the accountability established through workshop groups by having one-on-one conversations with students.   While working with the creative writing class at Denver East High School, I came across a talented student who initially brought half-formed drafts to peer workshops. When I pointed out multiple places in his rough draft where I thought he should be more specific and detailed, he explained his philosophy on the rough draft. He told me that, as he understood it, a "rough draft" is a summary of what you are going to write for your final draft. You write a summary, and later, you write in the details. If we had not had this conversation, I would have thought for the rest of the semester that this student was not one for detail—I would have designed specific instruction to teach him something that he is actually quite capable of doing. I explained what a "rough draft" means in a creative writing workshop: "Bringing in your rough draft in this class means bringing in the very best work you can do at the time. This class is about taking your very best writing, and making it better." This clarification helped at least one student realize that a poetry workshop is a place to come prepared to read, write and think in a community of writers all set on becoming better writers. Our conversation

resulted in the student bringing in more complete, specific, and detailed work, both in draft and final form.

2: A safe place to share work and make mistakes.

In order for students to push their writing and share their work, they need to feel that they are in a safe place, where they are free to make mistakes. Students need to know that they will be supported in their efforts to write in unfamiliar and even scary ways, even when the outcome is unpolished. A poetry class should, in fact, celebrate all that is weird and unfamiliar and new. Similarly to the class culture of accountability, the teacher constructs a safe classroom through direct instruction, workshop procedures and by example. The following practices will help establish a safe classroom in which students share and write freely, without fear:

1. **Start the unit by explaining and modeling poetry as experimental.** Many students come to poetry with preconceptions of poetry as stiff, "deep," technical, limited, or overly complex. Destroy this misconception as quickly as possible by showing students examples of poetry that is weird, simple, funny, or unexpected. Don't try to over-explain poems that students initially "don't get." Letting confusion and strangeness linger in the classroom can ultimately make students more willing to bring new and unfamiliar ideas to class.

2. **Emphasize the vocal aspect of poetry immediately by showing examples of poets reading or performing their own work.** Talk about the importance of sharing work aloud right away; ask students what they learn or experience from a

performance of a poem that they do not from reading the poem on the page. Be

sure to show examples of poets that are both dramatic and more serious or

subdued while reading. It is important to ease the anxiety of those students who

are not interested in dramatic performance. A poetry class is not an acting class—

talk about the difference between poetry and drama, and let students know that

there is more than one way to effectively read a poem.

3. **Present the poetry idea or assignment and show student examples.** In their

   book, *Poetry Everywhere*, writers Jack Collom and Sheryl Noethe emphasize the

   importance of sparking student thinking by showing examples not only of

   published, "adult" poetry, but also of student writing. They explain:

   > Read many examples aloud (and then simply ask the students not to copy).
   > Point out the "poetic goodies" in the example poems, especially when they
   > channel the students' attention in the direction you want. To focus
   > attention on language, you can ask students for their favorite words in
   > what they've just heard. (Collom, Noethe 8)

   Student examples do not need to be perfectly polished. The point of student

   models is to take what may seem like a daunting task and demonstrate multiple

   approaches that other students (just like them) have taken. Student examples also

   draw attention to the relevance of the poetry idea in question. If a third grader can

   write a poem about the same poetry idea as Wordsworth, then maybe a high

   school sophomore will feel that they too can join in the conversation.

4. **Write with your students, whenever possible.** There is always business to

   attend to in the classroom, the most basic being wandering around and making

   sure that students are on task. Try to sit down and write poems with students.

There is no better way to encourage students to share their work—a terrifying task without any time to edit or revise—than to share your own work on the spot. Be sure to share honest and fresh work. While sharing just-written work can break down student apprehension, sharing work that is obviously way better than anything they have come up with on the spot is counterproductive. You want students to know that you, also, are pushing yourself to step out of your comfort zone and write unfamiliar and exciting poetry.

5. **Give concrete and sincere praise when students share their work aloud.**

   Never give students reason to fear sharing their work. Find within each poem one specific word, phrase, or device that was employed successfully. As Collom and Noethe explain, "Never give false praise…You can often praise rhythm or energy or spirit or originality when it's hard to find anything else to share" (Collom, Noethe 10). The only exception to this is the student who does not take the assignment seriously and shares their work to "be cool," or to get a laugh, often at their teacher's expense. Give students every reason to fear this offense.

3: A framework for reading and writing poems

Kenneth Koch structures his lessons around "poetry ideas," or specific ways that poems function within a context—be that the world, a community, or the self. While this is the framework around which I structure my poetry lessons, there are others that function similarly to scaffold student learning by identifying specific ways that poems function in conversation with each other and with the world. Professor and poet

Stephanie Young offers one way of structuring a workshop through essential questions,

based on Bhanu Kapil Rider's *The Vertical Integration of Strangers*:

> Who are you and whom do you love?
> What do you remember about the earth?
> How will you begin?
> Describe a morning you woke with fear.
> Tell me what you know about dismemberment.
> Where did you come from/how did you arrive?
> Who was responsible for the suffering of your mother?
> What is the shape of your body?
> How will you live now?
> What are the consequences of silence?
> How will you/have you prepare(d) for your death?
> And what would you say if you could?
>
> (Rider 9)

Each week, students read poems that correspond to one of the questions, then come to

class with their own poem that approaches the question under study (Young 192-193).

 Young's syllabus functions similar to Koch's in that both look for the ways in

which the poem functions to address something bigger—be that a question or an idea. By

returning to the greater context of poetry—poetry's function within the greater world—

both of these poets and educators present the individual poet and poem as part of a larger

conversation. Such an approach appeals to students in the way that spoken word appeals

to students: students want to know that what they say and think matters and has an

audience beyond themselves. The purpose of a framework for the poetry workshop is to

create a conversation within the classroom that is not isolated from the world outside of

the classroom, a conversation in which students read poems, relate these poems to what

they know and think, and then write in response to the ideas or questions they are

experiencing.

Many professors structure their college-level poetry workshops around a book list, assigning students five to ten books of poetry. Throughout the semester, students read these books, discuss what the poems are doing and how the poet creates meaning, and respond via imitation, response poetry, or prose. The difference between this structure and Koch's "poetry ideas" framework is that in the traditional workshop format structured around books, it is usually up to the student to decide upon the "poetry idea." The college professor directs class discussion to include some key aspects of the work if the students fail to bring them into the conversation, but students largely direct the interpretation and discussion of each book. Koch's poetry ideas and Young's twelve questions support and build understanding of poetry by giving students a specific lens from which to make sense of what they read.

4: A diverse bank of poetry to read that lends itself toward the unit framework— questions, poetry ideas, etc.— as well as a survey of the span of poetry under study.

Once the teacher structures the poetry workshop, he or she must collect poems. Like the choice of novels for a literature class, the choice of poems for the poetry unit determines the content, tone, and appeal of the class. The poems determine what students write, as well as how they come to understand both poetry and the importance of poetry in their lives and in the world. While the selection of poetry is an important task, it is also one of the most difficult, since it requires access to and knowledge about a variety of poems. I find that the more diverse the selection of poems presented to the class, the more challenging and engaging the student writing will be.

In his introduction to *From Totems to Hip-Hop: A Multicultural Anthology of Poetry Across the Americas, 1900 – 2002,* poet Ishmael Reed explains his frustration with the lack of variety and controversy amongst poetry in the classroom. He writes, "there is also beauty outside the canon. Some physicists say that ours may not be the only universe…Generations of students have been damaged by the unitraditional reading of American literature" (Reed XXI). Reed's anthology includes American poetry ranging from Gwendolyn Brooks to Robert Frost to Sylvia Plath to Tupac Shakur. He presents a new anthology, grouping poems thematically rather than chronologically, with the intent of giving students and teachers a culturally inclusive bank of poetry from which to study. Reed emphasizes the importance of choosing a variety of poetry so that students understand both that they can write about their own concrete experiences and aesthetics, and that their own poetry "can stand alongside some of the best poetry being written. They're surprised to learn that they can write poems about their tastes and icons…H.D. wrote about Helen of Troy; Corie Rosen wrote about Madonna (the one from Detroit)" (XXVIII). Choosing a wide and inclusive reading list will empower student writing, while pushing them to consider poetry in unfamiliar ways. By the time they reach high school, most students have read Frost's "The Road Not Taken" and Poe's "The Raven." Giving students a variety of poems, both new and old, lyrical, narrative, and experimental, will help them recognize poetry as a forum, as a contemporary conversation into which they also can join.

5: A comprehensive and clear practice for giving and receiving feedback.

The first time I facilitated writing workshop groups in a high school classroom was disastrous. I had students make four 15-minute appointments with other students in the class. For fifteen minutes, students met with a partner, read each other's work, and answered three questions:

1. What do you like about what you are reading?
2. What do you think could be different about the piece you are reading?
3. How does the writer address the writing prompt?

After the fifteen-minute interval ended, students would find their second partner and repeat the process. The activity worked effectively only in that each student read four other students' work, and in so doing left the class with some new ideas for their own writing. When I walked around the room, I realized that I had completely failed to prepare students to give constructive feedback. In response to the first question, "What do you like about what you are reading," the most common answer I saw was something along the lines of, "this has a great flow. Nice job." Many students skipped over question two, deciding not to give any suggestions for improvement. Those who gave advice most often told their partner to "explain things more." Halfway through the activity, I had to stop the class to explain the difference between helpful and useless feedback.

The final fundamental practice that a teacher must establish in order for the poetry workshop to function in the high school classroom is a method of giving and receiving feedback. Based on experience in the classroom, I find that high school students are often initially reluctant to give and defensive when receiving honest and constructive feedback. As carefully as students need to be taught to read and consider poems, so too students need to be taught to give and receive valuable criticism.

I introduce this practice by explaining on the first day that the point of the poetry workshop is to become better writers by writing, reading and commenting on each other's work, and that this objective requires honest and helpful feedback. I then facilitate a discussion about the difference between constructive and useless feedback. I ask students to volunteer examples of feedback that are not helpful to the writer:

- This is good.
- Nice flow.
- This poem stinks.

I then have students take these comments and change them so that they offer specific praises or suggestions for the improvement of the writing. The comment, "Nice flow," might become, "I really like the rhyme and rhythm that you use in the first line. Right away, I can already feel the calm mood you are trying to create." "This poem stinks" might become, "The poem says a lot about emotion but doesn't ever give any specific images for us to see…so it is hard to really experience what the poem is trying to convey."

If students feel uncomfortable criticizing their peers' poetry, have them practice giving quality feedback as a class or in small groups on poems from outside of the classroom. Give students a poem that they will dislike (you can spend a few minutes writing a bad poem), and ask them to justify their dislike with suggestions for how the poem could be better. If a student says they love a poem, ask them to explain the specific parts of the poem that they like. Giving honest and helpful feedback ultimately comes down to the students' ability to recognize specific aspects of the poem that work effectively, and those that do not, as well as a repeated conversation about the overall intent to improve as writers by reading and commenting on each other's work.

After refocusing my class and talking through the difference between helpful and useless feedback, I went around the room and checked to make sure that each student had at least one constructive comment about their writing. I explained how they can use their feedback to improve their writing. Before students left the class, I checked to make sure that every student had received some constructive feedback. I also asked students to turn in their feedback with their drafts, so that I could offer additional instruction to students that struggled to write constructive criticism. The time spent at the beginning of the unit to establish a practice for giving and receiving meaningful feedback was well worth my effort: not only did this enable students to help each other write better poetry throughout the unit, but such a practice also enables students to give peer feedback on other forms of writing throughout the year.

A Guide to Navigation

The six-week poetry unit plan that follows brings together the formalist and reader-response approaches by looking at ways that poets use language to interact with the reader and with the world. The unit requires students to wrestle with and embrace ambiguity, both in their reading and writing of complex poems. Throughout the unit, students focus foremost on the way that the poem functions in the broad conversation that is "poetry." By examining and writing poems that use language to ask questions, to surprise, or to make meaning, students will begin to develop new ways of thinking, understanding and writing about literature and the world.

I outline this unit in a syllabus and daily lesson plans. I include three lesson plans for each week of the unit, with the intent of using the remaining two hours of instruction for workshop and revision. I detail the processes of workshop, revision, and publication—processes that must function effectively in order for the unit to be meaningful for students—following the daily lesson plans. All poems read and discussed throughout the unit appear in the poetry appendix, which can serve as a course reader for prospective students.

Implementing this unit requires as much vulnerability and creativity from the teacher as it does from the student. The activities and discussion questions that I suggest are not easy, or even answerable. On the contrary, they are as ambiguous and complex as the poems they explore. While the primary goal of this unit is to demonstrate ways that poetry teaches students to analyze, interpret and respond to complex texts—a fundamental objective of the Common Core State Standards—these lessons are by no means finite or prescriptive. This is not—or rather, there is not—an easy way to "get through" teaching poetry. These lessons call us, as teachers, to approach the teaching of poetry as one might approach any noble and terrifying expedition: with nervousness, excitement, and that lingering feeling that we might have forgotten something important at home. We most certainly have. When we teach poetry, we leave behind our attachment to the linear and predictable. We leave behind our attachment to answers, to our long-held belief that A leads to B. We uncover language that asks questions, that demands us to join a conversation. As teachers, we bring students with us as we search for unexplored ways of interacting with words. We step into a new space, in which A leads to B, but also to C and twenty-four and the color blue; we do this without knowing exactly where we

will end up. The moment we stop being afraid of poetry is the moment we realize that in the effort to explain and prepare for our grand expedition, we forgot to drive to the airport and get on the airplane. In order to teach poetry, we must ask questions that scare us. We must look for new ways to interpret and understand reading and writing. We must learn not only to tolerate, but to celebrate multiplicity and ambiguity in the classroom, since it is only by holding within our minds—and within our writing—such complex, competing ways of understanding, that we can begin to make sense of the unendingly various world that we live in.

If I read a book (and) it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.

- Emily Dickinson

It kind of pisses me off that people say nothing rhymes with orange, cause I can think of a lot of things that rhyme with orange. For example, I put my orange four-inch door hinge in storage and ate porridge with George.

- Eminen

Each poem is a radius, and a radical. It must reach at its own angle. It must grow its way through its soil. It must attend to its environment, and we must attend to its growth, allowing it to reach for us, to show us how to perceive change, and how to change with it.

- Jake Adam York

Intent:

The goal of this unit is to explore how poetry functions on the page, in performance, and in our lives. We will read and write poems that enter into a variety of conversations—conversations about poetry, about ourselves, and about the world. We will ask a lot of questions, but we may not find a lot answers, because poetry a process of breaking down and building anew. Every week, you will read poems that approach a single idea or question. Every week, you will respond to these poems and this idea with your own writing. Every week you will read and critique each other's work and in the end, we will publish our poems. In this unit, you will learn to use language expressively and innovatively. In this unit, we will push our ways of thinking, reading and writing into new terrain.

WARNING: you may never see the world the same way again.

Materials:

All students will need the following materials in class every day. Failure to bring the following materials will result in the disappointment of yourself, myself, your parents, the president, the poet we are reading, and your fellow poets in this class. Bring your stuff:

- A Poetry notebook. Work for other classes is NOT ALLOWED in this notebook.
- A pencil.
- Your poetry packet.
- Any poem that you were assigned to read or write.

Poetry Workshop

Unit Outline:

Throughout this unit, we will look at various ways that poems function on the page and in our lives. The following schedule outlines the major ideas and questions we will approach, as well as *some* of the poems we will read. Both you and I are at liberty to add topics, poems and assignments as we see fit.

Week 1 - What is Poetry?
Reading:
 "Pioneers! O pioneers!" by Walt Whitman, 1865
"Shake the Dust" by Anis Mogjani, 2010
"Lady Lazarus" by Sylvia Plath, 1965
"How do you Teach Poetry" by Jake Adam York, 2010
 "Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note" by Amiri Baraka, 1961
Other topics we will discuss: How do we talk about poetry? How do we comment on each other's poetry? Why does poetry matter (if you think it does)?

Week 2 - How poems ask questions.
Reading:
"A child said, What is the grass?" by Walt Whitman, 1855
"Uses for Spanish in Pittsburg" by Kristin Naca, 2009
"The Tyger" by William Blake, 1794
Other topics we will discuss: How poems answer questions.

Week 3 – How poems tell stories.
Reading:
"The Creation" by James Weldon Johnson, 1927
"Creation Myth" by Mathias Svalina (one or many), 2009
"deer and salt block" by Joshua Marie Wilkinson, 2009
"Your Teacher Turns into an Ant" by a Ricky Mann, 1994
Other topics we will discuss: What kinds of stories can poems tell? How do poems talk to each other? How do poems describe things?

Week 4 – Poems and bodies and the self.
Reading:
"The Mysterious Human Heart" by Matthew Dickman, 2008
sections from *The Descent of Alette* by Alice Notley, 1996
sections from *Recyclopedia* by Harryette Mullen's, 2006
"A Carafe, that is a Blind Glass" by Gertrude Stein, 1912
Other topics we will discuss: How language defines/doesn't define us. Feminism and poetry.

Week 5 – How poems challenge and change
Reading:
"Sonnet 130" by William Shakespeare, 1609
"Sonnet L" by Ted Berrigan, 1964
 "This is Just to Say" by William Carlos Williams, 1934
Other topics we will discuss: WHY and HOW poets use and break traditional forms.

Week 6 – How and when poems enter the universe.
Reading: Each other's poems. Last revisions. Publication. Performance.

Final Project: Poetry Chapbook

At the end of this unit, you will revise and publish your poems in a chapbook that you create.

A chapbook is a small (or big) handmade book of polished poems. These are published by poets and presses around the county. Making a chapbook is one way that you will engage in the conversation of poets in our community.

Your chapbook will include:

- Five to ten polished poems (poems that have been critiqued and revised).
- A writer's statement in which you explain your intent behind your work.
- A dedication.
- A cover

You will see lots of examples of chapbooks before you create your own. We will read from our chapbooks at our poetry reading at the end of the unit (more details to follow).

Separate and return the following to me

Expectations

Read the following statements. If you feel that you can uphold these expectations, then sign you name on the line, and know that this is the right class for you.

1:      I will come to class prepared. Always. I will read and write every poem that is assigned and will bring required work to class.
2:      I will offer honest and helpful criticism to my peers. When someone suggests that I change my poem to make it better, I will thank them for their help. I will not hate them.
3:      I will never say "I like this poem" or "I hate this poem" without giving reasons to support my reaction.
4:      I will respect my peers when they are sharing their work by listening intently and responding honestly. I, in turn, will share my work with the confidence that it will be treated with respect.

Student Name:_____ Signature:_____

Poetry Workshop Unit Plan

The Premise
This poetry unit is designed for a 9th grade public high school classroom of about thirty students. While I designed the unit around the 9th grade standards, it can also function effectively in a 10th, 11th, or 12th grade classroom. The intent of the unit is to get students to read and write both formally complex and socially engaging poems. The six week unit is structured to look each week at a specific way in which poetry functions in our lives—by telling stories, asking questions, or expressing the self—and then write poetry that joins in this conversation. Ultimately, this unit establishes practices of close reading, questioning, and collaborating that will carry on to other forms of study within the English Language Arts and beyond.

How to Navigate the Unit:
This unit is based on the assumption that high school students visit their language arts classroom for five hours every week. Many schools offer ELA instruction in ninety-minute blocks, during which one might teach two "lessons" worth of instruction. I have designed this unit so that, each week, students will have three hours of structured, thematic reading and writing instruction, and two hours of time to workshop and revise. Poems and lessons are grouped into thematic weeks based on similarities in the overall theme or intent of the poems. Each lesson includes writing exercises that are intended to deepen understanding about the poem of the day by challenging students to respond using both the formal techniques and the abstract or thematic intent of the poet. Each lesson should function as follows:
1. Have multiple students read the poem out loud.
2. Allow time for students to share their initial response to the poem.
3. Present and discuss the poetry idea. My poetry ideas are phrased either as questions that the poem investigates (and that students will also investigate in their writing) or as exercises with which the poem engages.
4. Return to the poem. Analyze the specific way that language functions to create the poem and approach the poetry idea.
5. Have students apply the poetry idea and the formal strategies and techniques they have identified in their own response poem.

While it is always helpful to give students information on this historical context of the work they read, I include this aspect for those poems for which I believe a knowledge of the historical background is necessary for making sense of the poem or poetry idea with which I structure the lesson.

Following these daily reading and writing plans are plans for setting up and facilitating an effective workshop, as well as a process for revising and publishing student work. Since this unit is designed for a public high school classroom of about thirty students, it is necessary to organize and hold workshops with students in smaller groups. These plans are intended to describe ways of establishing these small group workshops so that they will provide each student with a safe, productive environment in which to read and critique each other's work. Following these plans is an appendix of poems that students will read throughout the unit. I designed this appendix with the intent of giving it to student at the beginning of the unit, so that they can begin thinking about the different ways that poetry plays with language and functions in the world.

Poetry Workshop

Objectives – In this unit, students will…

- Explore a variety of functions and forms of poetry by reading, discussing and writing a variety of poems.
- Work collaboratively to give and receive honest and helpful criticism.
- Discuss and write about the personal and social implications of poetry.
- Edit, revise and publish 10 - 12 poems.

Common Core State Standards addressed in this unit:

RL.9-10.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RL.9-10.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

RL.9-10.7. Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment (e.g., Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" and Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*).

RL.9-10.10. By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 9–10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9–10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

W.9-10.3d. Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

W.9-10.5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

W.9-10.10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

SL.9-10.1. 1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues,* building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
a. Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
b. Work with peers to set rules for collegial discussions and decision-making (e.g., informal consensus, taking votes on key issues, presentation of alternate views), clear goals and

deadlines, and individual roles as needed.

c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

d. Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

Poetry Workshop

Week 1: What is Poetry?

Lesson 1 – What makes a poem a poem?

Purpose:
To break down preconceptions/misconceptions of poetry by exposing students to different kinds of poetry, and therefore multiple ways of thinking about poetry. To introduce the practice of experiencing and responding to a poem through inquiry.

Poem(s) of the day: [3]
- "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qoc3f77bcXk
- "Shake the Dust" by Anis Mogjani
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0snNB1yS3IE
- "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" by Walt Whitman
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HG8tqEUTlvs

Poetry Idea: What is poetry? We all have ideas/opinions about what poetry is and who can write it. Some people say poetry rhymes, or is deep, emotional, difficult, beautiful, sad, cheesy, silly, childish, depressing, etc. Maybe poetry is not any one thing. Maybe poetry is an exploration, an adventure, an experiment. What makes a poem a poem?

Exercise 1: Each student gets two sticky notes. On one sticky note, students list words that come to mind when they think of poetry. On the other, students define "what makes a good poem good." Designate a place on the wall for students to place these sticky notes after everyone has had some time to write. Share some of the students' responses and discuss common understandings about poetry.

Exercise 2: Poetry Exploration. Present the poems of the day. Give students time to respond in any way they like. For each poem, discuss the following questions as a class/in groups/in writing:

1. What makes this poem a poem?
2. What do you like/love/hate about this poem? Why?

Generate a class list of "things that make a poem a poem." The list should include aspects that students notice from each poem, not only common elements from the three (feel free to rename the list "things that poems do"). This might be very hard. It should be very hard. If students leave this lesson confused about poetry, you are probably on the right track.

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[3] Many students are familiar with Frost's "The Road Not Taken." In my experience, students find Mogjani and Whitman fairly easy to understand right away. My intent here is to show students that there are multiple ways of writing poetry, without giving them anything that is too difficult to understand. I chose these poems because they are possibly recognizable, and initially accessible.

Poetry Workshop Unit Plan

Lesson 2 – Writing A Syllabus

Purpose: To further challenge preconceptions of poetry by having students write their own wacky/unrealistic/personal/ambiguous syllabus for a poetry unit, based on Jake Adam York's "How do you Teach Poetry." To consider reasons for reading and writing poetry in the classroom.

(Also to hand out and go over the real syllabus)

Poem(s) of the day:
"How do you Teach Poetry" by Jake Adam York

Questions for discussion:
- *What is the first thing you notice about this poem?*
- *What is the speaker trying to say about poetry?*
- *What is the speaker trying to say about his/her poetry class?*

Poetry Idea: If poetry is an experiment/adventure/exploration, then how do you teach it? How do you learn about it?

Exercise 1: Pretend you are the teacher of this class. Write a syllabus-poem that explains or describes how your students are going to learn about poetry in your class. Try and provide the most wacky/unrealistic/personal/ambiguous description of the class that you possibly can. Include at least one activity that is completely unrelated to writing poetry.[4]

Exercise 2/Homework: Write a poem in which you first claim that you are going to give very clear and logical directions for doing something, then proceed to give the most confusing/unusual/round-about directions that you can possible give for doing that thing.

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[4] *Students (especially younger students) might find York's poem a little difficult, and will benefit from anther example, which you can write on the spot. i.e.:*

Every day, you will need to bring to class:
- *Sixteen action figures*
- *The keys to a very expensive car*
- *A pencil*

Lesson 3 – How to Read Poetry for Content, Sound and Structure

Purpose: to explore ambiguity and multiple meanings of poetry by reading one poem multiple times, each time with a different focus.

Poem(s) of the day:
"Lady Lazarus" by Sylvia Plath[5]

Poetry Idea: poems function on multiple levels. On one level, poets include topics, themes and characters in order to say something about a particular content. On another level, poets employ words and sounds to create tone and meaning. By reading a poem multiple times, and by focusing on different aspects of the poem, how many different ways can we come to understand a poem?

Exercise 1: Prepare students by letting them know that they will be reading this poem multiple times. Each time, they will focus on a specific aspect of the poem, and from that aspect start to understand what the poem is doing. Students will read and annotate (mark) the poem, then take time to respond through individual writing and whole class discussion.

1st reading: Content/Tone (emotion)
> The first time we read poems, we allow ourselves to simply experience them. Instruct students to listen and follow along as you read the poem aloud. Tell them to focus on what the poem is writing about, but also to take notice of how the poem is making them feel. After reading, have students circle parts of the poem that they especially like. Have students respond in writing to the following:
- What is this poem trying to say?
- How do you feel when you read this poem?
- What words/lines/stanzas help you understand what this poem is trying to do? In other words, HOW is the poet getting you to understand the content of the poem?
  Have students share their response to this first reading with the class. Make sure to pay attention to the Holocaust imagery Plath uses in the poem. Ask students why they think that Plath includes this. Is she writing a poem about the Holocaust? Maybe. Partially. Have students consider what else this content is doing in the poem.

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[5] I chose this poem because of the attention that Plath pays to sound, repetition, the line, rhyme, etc. In my experience, students find this poem initially engaging and are able to understand the content of the poem in their first reading. The accessibility of Plath's content and tone, combined with her detailed play with sound, makes her poetry perfect for teaching the importance of reading poems multiple times—and thereby finding within poems multiple meanings.

2nd reading: Sound

> You may choose to read the poem aloud again or have another student do so. This time, instruct students to pay attention specifically to sound. Tell them to try and forget about the overall meaning of the poem and focus on the feeling of the words. Tell them to look for repetition not only of specific words and phrases (which they will find in the poem), but also of sounds. After reading, have students circle sounds and sound patterns that they noticed in the poem.
> Have students respond in writing to the following questions:

- What sounds did you notice in the poem? What sounds are repeated? What sounds stick out to you?
- Why do you think Sylvia Plath employs these sounds in her poem? What purpose do these sounds serve?
- How do these sounds relate to the *content and tone* that you noticed and felt during your first read-though.
  Have students share their response with the class.

3rd reading: Form

> Read the poem aloud for the third time. This time, instruct students to focus on the form of the poem on the page. Define form for students: form is the way the words are arranged on the page. Remind students that form is intentionally designed by the poet in order to help the poem do what it is trying to do. Tell them to listen to the way the poem moves according to the way it is written on paper. It is important that you (the teacher) read the poem aloud this time. Make sure that you read the poem as it is written. Pause when there is a line break. Exaggerate your reading so that the sound of you reading the poem matches the spacing of the words on the page (this may feel unnatural, but it will help students understand the impact of form). After reading, have student circle places where they think that the form emphasized a particular line or word. Have them circle a place where they found the form to be confusing or strange.
> Have students respond to the following questions:

- How would you describe the form of this poem? How does Plath arrange the words and lines?
- Why do you think that she does this?
- What effect does the form have on your experience and understanding of the poem?
  Have students share their response with the class.

At the end of the lesson, have students reconsider their initial reactions to the poem. Some students might feel very differently about the poem at the end of the lesson, after taking a closer look at the language. Ask students to write a new response, in which they use what they now know about sound and form. The essential question that they can now answer is this:

> What is the poem doing, and *how* is it accomplishing this?

This question will guide students throughout the entire poetry unit, as they look not only at the ways that poems functions in society and with the reader, but also as they analyze ways that poets employ content, sound and structure intentionally, to achieve a desired effect.

Poetry Workshop

Week 1: What is Poetry?

Lesson 4 – How to Talk About Poetry

Purpose: To establish a method for reading and talking about poetry by reading and responding to Amiri Baraka's "Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note" multiple times, with multiple areas of focus. To generate a list of "questions to ask a poem" that students can apply to every poem they read and write.

Poem(s) of the day:
"Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note" by Amiri Baraka

Poetry Idea: How do we talk about poems?

Exercise 1: Begin by giving students a bit of background information on Amiri Baraka and the poem (published in 1961 by Baraka, a civil rights activist, etc.). Have a student read the poem and ask students to circle something they like. Have another student read the poem, and have students circle one thing that they think is interesting. Have students write a question, and identify something that they don't understand. After students have sufficiently marked up the poem, ask students to share their impression of the poem, as well what they think the poem is trying to say. Have students write a list of questions that they think we, as readers, should ask poems when we meet them. Have students share these with the class and make a class list. Questions might include:

- What is the poem trying to say?
- What questions is the poem asking?
- How is the poem making meaning? In other words, what kinds of language/images/sounds/metaphors does the poet use…and why?
- What kinds of emotions is the poem trying to make the reader feel, and how does this work/not work?
- How could this poem be better?

Try to avoid questions like:

- What does the poem *mean*? (this is a sometimes hard and often irrelevant question, since many of the poems that we will read call meaning into question. Sometimes great poems will not have a linear, literal *meaning.* Other times, students will shut down or dislike a poem because they can't figure out what it *means).*
- Questions that can be answered with a "yes" or "no," such as "Does the poem use metaphors?"

Exercise 2: Arrange students into poetry groups and give each student a different role. Roles can change based on the poem and the key ideas/details that you want students to notice in the poem. Roles might include:

> **Word Worm:** your job is to notice and write down five words that the poet uses that you find most interesting. How do these words create feeling or meaning in the poem?
>
> **Emotional Wreck**: your job is to identify the emotions that you feel when you read this poem, and then make a list of ways that the poem creates this emotion.
>
> **Image Eye:** your job is to identify the specific images that the poet is using to create meaning or emotion in the poem, or to get the reader to *imagine* what is going on.

Have students take notes on their role then share their findings with the group. You can extend this exercise by having students write a group poem by contributing the aspect that they explored in their reading role (i.e. the "Word Worm" will contribute five awesome words, the "Emotional Wreck" the main emotions of the poem, etc.).

Exercise 3/Homework: Have students write a poem that begins with Baraka's first line:

> *Lately, I've become accustomed to the way…*

Poetry Workshop

Week 2: How Poems Ask Questions

Lesson 1 – Big Question Poems

Purpose: To write poems that ask big/hard/unanswerable/simple (but made more complex by our asking) questions, in response to Whitman's "A Child Said, What is the Grass." To identify and explore metaphorical and abstract description through Whitman's poem and our own writing.

Poem(s) of the day:
Section from "A Child Said, What is the Grass?" by Walt Whitman

Poetry Idea: How do poems ask/answer the big questions that we encounter in our lives? On the other hand, how do poems complicate the questions that we think are easy or straightforward?

Exercise 1: Write a list of questions. These questions can be about anything, but try to stick to the following guidelines: [6]

- Avoid questions that have a yes/no answer (such as, "do you like apples?").
- Avoid questions directed at a specific person (such as, "Mom, can I have an apple?"). Try to write universal questions that address a larger audience (such as, "What the heck is an apple?").
- Avoid writing all of your questions about the same thing. Write questions about lots of different things.
- Make sure you have at least ten questions.

Exercise 2: Choose one of your questions and address it in a poem. It is your choice whether you want to answer the question in your poem. You can do what Whitman does and answer the question in unexpected ways, or you can come up with ten different ways to ask the same question, and that can be your poem.

Stuck? Try this…
Make a list of ten answers that DO NOT answer your question. For example: If my question is, "Why is the sky blue?" I might write:
- There is a monster sitting on my desk
- Aliens
- I don't have a pen.
Pick your favorite/the weirdest "fake" answer and write a poem that explains how this is actually the real answer to your question.

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[6] NOTE: Like most guidelines/"rules" for poetry, these can be broken. The point is to get students to write poems that address big questions that are otherwise unanswerable, or to challenge questions that might seem simple. Certain questions will work better than others. However, if a student has a question that they really want to ask, let them. It will probably be great.

Poetry Workshop Unit Plan

Lesson 2 – Talking to unfamiliar beasts/beings[7]

Purpose: To make sense of William Blake's "The Tyger" by identifying audience, analyzing repetition/structure, and responding via our own poems that imitate these techniques.

Poem(s) of the day:
"The Tyger" by William Blake

Poetry Idea: How do poems address audiences and ask questions that normal humans/books/languages cannot address? How do poems navigate the relationship between the speaker and the unknown?

Exercise 1: Pick an animal or being that you are unable to communicate with on a regular basis. Some ideas:

- a lion.
- a being from an undiscovered planet.
- a rock.

Imagine that you suddenly have the ability to ask this being/beast/object/etc. anything that you want. Write a list of questions. Then write a poem where each stanza asks a different question. Look back to Blake's poem for ideas on how to ask these questions.

Exercise 2: Write a response poem back to your poem. Pretend that you are the creature/being/beast that you were interviewing. How might you respond? You can respond question by question, or you can interrupt your original poem with questions of your own (you being the rock/alien/lion/etc.).

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[7] Adapted from Kenneth Koch's lesson on Blake's "The Tyger" (Koch 5 – 35).

Poetry Workshop Unit Plan

Lesson 3 – Ways of Speaking, bilingual poetry

Purpose: to read and write poems that use language to question language/ways of speaking.

Poem(s) of the day:
"Uses for Spanish in Pittsburg" by Kristin Naca

Poetry Idea: sometimes poets use language introspectively, to question language/ways of speaking. How can we use language to question language itself?

Exercise 1: Think of ways of speaking that are unique to your family/culture/group of friends/job/interests/etc. You can interpret your own way of speaking in a variety of ways, but try and think of how you use language in a way that an outsider (someone who isn't a part of the group) would not understand. Write a poem that uses this unique language, but also asks questions about the language.

For example: you might pick an old family saying that doesn't make sense or is based on an inside joke that happened a long time ago. Share the saying or joke in your poem, but do it in a way that asks questions about the saying.

Exercise 2: Write a bilingual poem. Some people are fortunate enough to actually know two languages in the traditional sense: Spanish and English, English and French. It is okay to look words up in a language that you don't know. Also, in some way or another, we all speak multiple languages, or dialects. Think about how the language you speak with your friends is different from the language you use with your teachers, or on a resume. Choose two languages or ways of speaking. Don't worry about translating your poem so that every word exists in both languages, but do include some lines in both languages. Look back to Naca's poem for help on how to incorporate multiple languages. Think about the questions that come about (from both the poet and the reader) when a poem exists biligually. Embrace these questions. You may answer them only if you wish to do so.

Poetry Workshop

Week 3: How Poems Tell Stories

Lesson 1 – Telling Stories/Prose Poetry

Purpose: to further define/challenge the line between poetry and prose by reading and writing poems that function as stories (and stories that function as poems).

Poem(s) of the day:
"Your Teacher Turns into an Ant" by a Ricky Mann
"deer and salt block" by Joshua Marie Wilkinson's

> *for discussion:*
> - *How are these poems? How are these stories? What is the difference? Why does it matter?*
> - *How/Why do the poets use repetition in their work?*
> - *How do you think the poets went about writing these stories? What was their process? How can we mimic that process? To what end? (WHY?!)*
> - *Discuss the idea of "making sense" in poetry and stories. In what ways do these poems "make sense" or not "make sense"?*

Poetry Idea: Sometimes poems tell stories in ways that prose does not tell stories. But what *really* is the difference? How do poems tell stories? What kinds of stories do poems tell? How can we use poetry to tell stories in new ways?

Exercise 1: Make a list of common phrases that we use to signal time/plot in a story: once upon a time, in the beginning, suddenly, out of nowhere, and then, the first thing she saw was, next, over the course of a week, etc. Order these sayings so that they make sense chronologically, then fill in the lines so that they don't make sense at all, or so that they lead the reader to unexpected and crazy places.

Example:
In the beginning…there were birds landing on every windshield.
There was also… nothing happening in the houses or on the streets.
They started by… looking for signs of life, for people, for owners.
When all of the sudden… they realized that freedom might be better than looking.
It all resolved when… it never resolved, when they decided it wouldn't, when they made nests.

Exercise 2: Pick an item/object/thing/very small or unusual animal and tell the story of how it got from one place to another in the most unusual round about way that you can think of.

Week 3: How Poems Tell Stories

Lesson 2 – Old Stories, New Ways

Purpose: to analyze the literary and social significance of *retelling* old stories in new ways by reading and writing in response to James Weldon Johnson's "The Creation"

> **Historical Note (for teacher and student):** James Weldon Johnson (June 17, 1871 – June 26, 1938) was a writer, lawyer, professor (NYU) and early civil rights activist. He is known for his leadership with the NAACP, and for his writing. In his book, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse,* Johnson captures the rhetoric and spirit of the "folk sermon." He writes, "I remember hearing in my boyhood sermons that were current, sermons that passed with only slight modifications from preacher to preacher and from locality to locality" (Johnson 1-2). His poem, "The Creation," is a retelling of the book of Genesis, significant because it speaks from and to a distinct audience: African Americans establishing a unique culture, gaining strength in the civil rights struggle.

Poem(s) of the day:
"The Creation" by James Weldon Johnson

Poetry Idea: Johnson's poem tells a familiar story in a new way to appeal to a new audience (African Americans whose faith was based in folk sermons). How does he use language to do this? How can we use language to tell an old story in a new way?

Exercise 1: Think of a familiar story. This might be a story from the Bible (like Johnson's poem), a fairy tale, a legend, a popular children's story, etc. Write a poem in which you tell this story in a way that appeals to an audience different from that of the original story (for example, you might retell the story, "the Tortoise and the Hare" to a group of highly intelligent scientists with extensive vocabularies, or the story, "Cinderella," to the High School football team).

Exercise 2: Johnson's poem both retells a familiar story and works to define a culture—the religious culture of the African American population experiencing the "folk sermons" of the 1910s/20s. Write your own creation poem, one that tells the familiar story of the beginning of the world (however you understand it), in a way that demonstrates the culture—ways of speaking, things that are important—of today. Think about the way that you talk with your family and friends. Write a poem that tells the story of creation, as you might explain it to someone today. Think about the kinds of language that you insert into such a familiar story to tell it your own way.

Lesson 3 – Creation Myths[8]

Purpose: to explore detail, truth, and the bizarre by reading and writing "absurdist"/funny creation myths, inspired by *Creation Myth* by Mathias Svalina. To consider the function of humor and the absurd in poetry and in conversation with the world.

Poem(s) of the day:
"Creation Myth" by Mathias Svalina (one or many)

> *for discussion:*
> - *What makes this poems funny?*
> - *How does this "myth" speak to/question the real world? Look at the concepts, ideas and issues that this poem approaches (God, hunger, basic needs, etc.).*
> - *Notice the specificity of the poem. Why is the poet so specific?*

Poetry Idea: How can we use the absurd and specific to tell origin stories that push our understanding of the familiar and the world?

Exercise 1: Write a creation myth poem. Start your poem with "In the beginning," and then write your own version of how it all happened. Get ridiculous/absurd/crazy/non-realistic. You can write your poem as a prose poem (where it looks like Svalina's), or you can break it up like the other poems we have read, into lines and stanzas.

Stuck?
Think of an object. Anything: a bird, a balloon, a salt shaker. Begin there ("In the beginning there were lots of salt shakers"). The rest of your poem needs to explain why it all began with this object ("and all the salt shakers were too full of salt, so that when the little baby tipped them over, they spilled all over the whole universe, and suddenly everyone was in desperate need of pepper, etc…").

Exercise 2: Write a destruction myth poem. Start your poem with "in the end." Write your version of the end of the world.

Stuck?
Think big: what happens to the oceans, the continents, the sky?
Now think small: what happens to the matchsticks, the watches, the apples?

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[8] This lesson is inspired by *Creation Myth*, by Mathias Svalina. In this lesson, students will write imitation poems—another opportunity to talk to students about the difference between inspiration and plagiarism, to teach how and when to give cite a source.

Poetry Workshop Unit Plan

Week 4: Poems and Bodies and the Self

Lesson 1 – Using objects to tell our stories

Purpose:
To explore the ways in which objects can describe characters. To introduce students to indirect characterization and another way to use concrete images/objects in their poems.

Poem of the day:
"The Mysterious Human Heart" by Matthew Dickman

> *For discussion:*
> - *What is the poem trying to say about the speaker? How is this clear/unclear?*
> - *A majority of this poem is a list of items. Why do you think Dickman does that?*
> - *What questions is this poem asking? What answers does it give?*

Poetry Idea:
 Sometimes poems express identity/the self indirectly by giving images or objects in place of descriptions or characteristics. In Dickman's poem, the speaker describes a shopping trip to a market in New York, but what he is really describing is himself. Think about this: How can you describe yourself, or someone you know, through only objects? What do *things* say about who we are?

Exercise 1:
Pick a place where you like to go/have been before/can imagine going that says something about who you are (an amusement park, a campground, your kitchen, etc.). For Dickman, this is a market in New York. You can pick any place, but make sure you can get really specific about the objects that are there. Now, picture yourself walking around that place. What do you see? What do you pick up? Write a poem in which you describe yourself through your interaction with the objects in the room. Try to let us know as much as possible about you, but use the objects to do so.

Exercise 2:
Think of a person that you know really well (this can be yourself). Make a list of objects that you associate with this person. Now, pretend you are the only one who knows the secrets to this person's "mysterious human heart" (hey, maybe you really are!). Write a poem in which you show us just how mysterious this person's heart is by describing them through the objects you listed.

Poetry Workshop

Week 4: Poems and Bodies and the Self

Lesson 2 – the "I" in the Poem

Purpose: to identify multiple ways that the "I" can function in poetry by reading and writing in response to Alice Notley's *The Descent of Alette.* To explore the creative use of punctuation in Alice Notley's poem, and its interaction with the self/the "I."

Poem(s) of the day:
Sections from *The Descent of Alette*, by Alice Notley

> *For discussion:*
> - *Why does Notley use the quotation marks? What purpose does this serve? What does this make you think about the "I"/the self that is speaking in the poem?*
> - *Considering the punctuation, how would you read this poem aloud?*

Poetry Idea: sometimes poems help us express ourselves. Other times, poems question or confuse the self. Who is the "I" in the poem? How can we use the "I" to express/push/challenge/forget/question ourselves?

Exercise 1: Write a poem that tells a story about yourself, using the "I" (i.e. write in first person). Try to write a story that involves both physical and emotional change simultaneously (notice that Notley's poems are never as simple as one or the other). Write your poem in whatever form is comfortable for you. Now, go back through your poem and change the line breaks/punctuation so that it is no loner linear. Change it so that the reader cannot read it in the manner that you originally intended. Try to confuse/challenge who the speaker is—the "I," which in this case is you—by introducing nontraditional punctuation.

Exercise 2: Pick an emotion or emotional transition that you or someone you know is going through. Write a poem in which you describe this abstract emotional change through a physical journey. Do not *tell* your readers what the emotion is. Instead, write about a physical journey/adventure and choose concrete objects that *embody* this emotion/change. Again, write in first person (using the "I"). This time, however, the "I" doesn't have to be you.

Poetry Workshop Unit Plan

Lesson 3 – Identity construction/Language Poetry

Purpose: to analyze Mullen's and Stein's word choice and determine its effect on meaning by reading and writing in response to their poetry. To identify and explore connotation and its role in constructing meaning and describing a character.

Poem(s) of the day:
"[OF A GIRL, IN WHITE]"by Harryette Mullen
"A Carafe, that is a Blind Glass" by Gertrude Stein

> *For discussion:*
> - *What sounds are Stein and Mullen trying to create? How does the sound of the poem change the way you read or think about the poem?*
> - *What phrases in the poems are familiar to you? What phrases make sense and don't make sense? Why do you think the poets included these phrases?*

Poetry Idea: Poets like Stein and Mullen use language to create and embody a new reality. Their poetry causes us to look at the way that language *constructs* reality—how we see the world, and how we see ourselves. How can we use language to construct an identity or world that is different from what we know?

Exercise 1: Mullen/Stein choose their words very carefully, fully aware of the *connotations* that each word brings to the poem. Pick five words from one of the poems that stand out to you for some reason. For each of these words, make a list of as many *connotations* (images, objects, ideas, other words) that come to mind when you think of that word. Look back at the poem. How do these connotations enter into the poem? How do they add to the meaning?

Exercise 2: Pick a character. This can be yourself, someone you know, or someone you make up entirely. Make a list of objects that describe this person. Picture their room. What kinds of things do they interact with every day? Pick five of these objects and make a list of *connotations* that come to mind when you think of these things. Now write a poem that uses both the objects and their connotations to describe this character.

Poetry Workshop Unit Plan

Week 5: How Poems Challenge and Change

Lesson 1 – Sonnets, Insult, and Love[9]

Purpose: to question and criticize cheesy romance and unwarranted praise by analyzing Shakespeare's use of the sonnet form and writing our own realistic/offensive comparison sonnets.

Poem(s) of the day:
"Sonnet 130" by William Shakespeare

> *for discussion:*
> - *Is this/is this not a love poem? Why?*
> - *How/Why does Shakespeare use metaphor in the poem?*
> - *What/Who is this poem insulting, if anyone?*
> - *Many poems include a turn at the end that changes the meaning of the poem. What is the "turn" of this poem? Where does the poem really come together?*

Poetry Idea: In "Sonnet 130," Shakespeare uses the sonnet form to criticize the overly dramatic metaphors and unrealistic romance that the form is known to express. How can you we use a genre/form to criticize what that genre/form often stands for?

NOTE: there are two approaches to this lesson. One is to teach the sonnet form in greater detail (i.e. rhyme scheme, iambic pentameter, etc.). The other is to loosely examine the structure of the sonnet, but not ask students to write a perfect sonnet. It is really up to the teacher/students to decide which method is most effective/generative. Sometimes, students will benefit from strict guidelines such as traditional sonnet form. Other times, this will prove limiting. Whatever the method, encourage students to challenge the romance and rules of the sonnet by including a "turn" in the poem that turns what might seem insulting or dissonant into something meaningful, lovely, or fun.

Exercise 1: Think of something you love for unconventional/unexpected reasons. Write a sonnet in which you start by describing (like Shakespeare does) the lesser qualities of this love. Then turn it all around and tell us why it really is the greatest (as always, look to Shakespeare for advice). A traditional sonnet should include:
- Fourteen lines with the rhyme scheme: *a-b-a-b, c-d-c-d, e-f-e-f, g-g*
- Iambic pentameter: five "feet" or beats in every line, with the stress falling on the last syllable of each foot.
  Note: Teaching traditional sonnet writing will likely require more time than it will just to explore Shakespeare's more conceptual project of challenging the function of the sonnet by writing the sonnet. If you want students to write traditional, iambic, rhyming sonnets, you might allow for two days for this lesson.

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[9] This lesson is inspired by Nicholas Decoulos' lesson, "Adding Insult to Poetry," from *Don't Forget to Write for the Secondary Grades.*

Poetry Workshop

Week 5: How Poems Challenge and Change

Lesson 2 – The Found/Nonsense/Anti Sonnet

Purpose: to "challenge" the form of the sonnet by reading and responding to Ted Berrigan's "Sonnet L." To explore how poets both use and break traditional forms—such as the sonnet—to make meaning.

Poem(s) of the day:
"Sonnet L" by Ted Berrigan

Poetry Idea: How can we use traditional forms such as the sonnet to call linear ways of thinking and speaking into question? How do the limits of traditional forms stretch and challenge our writing and thinking?

Exercise 1:
Step 1 – Write down 5 lines. These lines can but do not have to be related. They can be about anything. They can be random thoughts, or lists, or notes to yourself.
Step 2 – Stand up and walk around the room. Talk to someone, then write down what they say. Steal someone else's line. Listen in on a conversation. Look out the window and write down what you see. Add 5 new lines to your list. [10]
Step 3 – Take out a book. Any book: vocabulary book, biology book, novel, etc. Flip through the book and write down 5 lines/phrases that catch your eye.
Step 4 – You now have fifteen lines. You may cut one that you don't like, but you will use the others to create your sonnet. Don't worry about making sense, unless you really want to. Arrange your lines in the order you like, so long as you include fourteen lines.

Suggestions:
- Write a variety of lines. Include abstractions and concrete images.
- It might work well to include one image or object in a couple of lines, to create a thread in the poem (notice Berrigan's dream thread).
- Try repeating a line (such as Berrigan's, "I like to beat people up").
- Include lines that sounds like they are from a story ("…as I was saying winter of 18 lumps")

Exercise 2:
Words/lines take on entirely new meaning when you put them next to something new. Write a new sonnet by rearranging the lines from your first sonnet. Try and make your new sonnet as different as possible, using the same language.

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[10] It might be a good idea at some point in the lesson/unit to explain the difference between "stealing" lines/ideas/words for inspiration and plagiarizing. You don't want students to think that they can copy each other's poems and simply rearrange the lines to make it their own.

Poetry Workshop

Week 5: How Poems Challenge and Change

Lesson 3 – Implication: Meaning Beyond Meaning[11]

Purpose: to explore beyond-the-surface implications of language by reading and responding to William Carlos Williams' "This is Just to Say."

Poem(s) of the day:
"This is Just to Say" by William Carlos Williams

> *For discussion:*
> - *Look at the format of this poem. Why does Williams keep the poem so short?*
> - *How does the length/concision of language create meaning in the poem?*
> - *What is this poem trying to do? Is this an apology poem?*
> - *What do you think of the title? Is this "just to say"?*

Poetry Idea: sometimes poems say more than they seem to at first glance.

Exercise 1: Staging the action of this poem will help students understand the sarcastic, more-to-it-than-it-seems nature of Williams' poems—the ability for a poem to speak more than what the words say on the surface. Before class starts, tell a student (in secret) that you are going to leave the room at the beginning of class and put them in charge (just for a minute). Tell them you will publically ask them to hold your lunch and make sure that no one eats the food (bring plums if you can, but anything will do). Tell the student to eat the food as soon as you leave the room, as publically as possible, then write William Carlos Williams' poem on the board. Come back in the room, and act as upset as possible when you read the poem.

Exercise 2:
Think about a time when you did something that you were not supposed to do. Write an apology poem in which you "apologize" for what you did, while also **implying** that you don't regret your decision. Write a poem that seems like an apology on the surface, but is actually not an apology at all. Think about how—through sarcasm, word choice, etc.—you can say one thing (I'm sorry!), but mean something else (I'm actually not sorry at all!).

Things to think about:

- Try to write your poem using as few words/lines as possible. How can you, like Williams, say everything using concise language?

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[11] This lesson is adapted from Kenneth Koch's lesson on the same poem. (Koch 98 - 124).

Poetry Workshop

Establishing Effective Processes for Workshop

One of the most challenging aspects of teaching creative writing in the classroom is the struggle to make peer review constructive and useful. It is important to structure workshop time enough so that students do not consider it "free time," and also have a means of getting useful feedback about their writing. As discussed previously, it is necessary to teach students the difference between useful and useless feedback:

Exercise: Have students make a list of useless feedback. Have them write extremely useless feedback that they might receive on a poem (such as, "you are cute," or "I hate poetry"). Also have them include less obviously useless comments that you actually expect to see (such as, "this poem is good" or "flow is kind of off"). Then have them practice changing these useless comments into useful ones, by adding specificity:

> "the flow is off" might become "your rhythm gets a bit confusing because some lines are really long, and others are only one or two words long."

Formats for workshop

1: Regular workshop groups: divide students into small groups of five or six students, and have them read and comment on these students' poems every week. Keeping consistent workshop groups can help increase student-based accountability, and students can benefit from walking with each other through the revision process. The ideal workshop group will function as a safe, self-motivating community within the classroom. Setting regular workshop groups will function most effectively in a class where most students are committed and motivated. Students must be grouped strategically so that every student is supported and challenged by at least one other student in their group.

2: Make an appointment: Have students draw a clock on a blank sheet of paper. Give them five minutes to walk around the room and make "appointments" for twelve o'clock, three o'clock, six o'clock and nine o'clock. Give them ten or fifteen minutes for each of their appointments, during which they read and comment on each other's work. I tested this format in a class of juniors and seniors at East High School in Denver, and found it to be successful both in getting students quality feedback (once we told them what quality feedback looks like), and in keeping them focused. Students have some say in who they work with, but the regular pace structures the workshop enough that students stay focused. This format works most effectively for a class that needs more structure to stay on task. The benefit of such a format is that students get to read many of their peers' work.   This format also allows the teacher to step in and make appointments with students—offering one-on-one writing conferences.

Moving Students from Draft to Publication

Publishing and presenting work as the final product of a poetry unit gives student incentive to take workshop and revision seriously. The sixth week of this poetry unit is set aside for revision and publication. Similar to workshop time, time set aside for revision and publication requires structure. Provide students with multiple check-in points and assess progress regularly as you move through the week.

Options for Publication:

1: Chapbook. Have students create chapbooks. A chapbook is a handmade, generally small book of poems that is published by the poet or by a small, independent press. Chapbooks usually include poems that relate in some way (via a common theme, a similar process for writing, etc.). Having students create chapbooks will push them to look at their work as a body, as a larger project. Students will go through the process of creating a book (they will write a dedication and an artists' statement), which will guide them to think analytically about their work as a whole, and their overall progress throughout the unit. Since chapbooks involve a significant amount of independent work, it is advisable to structure the publication process in segments, with several check-in points in which students must conference with each other or with their teacher (see *Project Planning*). Students will also need to see examples of chapbooks, which can be found online or in bookstores. The traditional chapbook looks much like the insert of a CD case. Some students will respond more than others to the challenge of making an artistic, "professional-looking" chapbook. Chapbooks should be assessed more on quality of writing and evidence of revision than on appearance (see *Poetry Chapbook Rubric*).

2: Class or Group Anthology. Students can also publish their work in group or class anthologies. This format will work better for students who will benefit more from revising and perfecting a single poem than from gathering and revising an entire body of work. The most significant benefit of a class anthology is that students will finish the unit with a copy of the best work of each of their peers. Have students choose one or two of their best poems. Have them workshop multiple drafts of their poem(s) with several students and make revisions. If possible, conference with every student about their work. The Project Planning sheet, designed for the chapbook, can be adapted to segment and structure student revision of single poems.

Presentation: Ultimately, we should celebrate student work through performance. Conclude the poetry unit by hosting a poetry reading, in which students share their work. Ideally, this should be an event to which other students and parents are invited. Encourage all students to share something. Show examples of poetry performance, beyond slam poetry (some students will not connect with dramatic performance, and should be reassured that it is fine to read the poem, so long as one does with integrity), and have students practice reading poems aloud to prepare for this celebration.

PROJECT PLANNING:

STEP 1: What do I have?

The four poems I want to include in my book are:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Additional poems I want to include:

STEP 2: What do I need?

Four things that I need to write/work on in order to make my book:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

STEP 3: How am I going to get there?

This is the important part. We are going to spend the next several days creating our books in class. In order for this to be valuable time for you, create a plan for how you are going to create your book. When you are happy with your plan, come show it to me.

I will complete my book by   _____

> **Step 1**
> I will _____
>
> Date started: Date finished:

> **Step 2:**
> I will _____
>
> Date started: Date finished:

> **Step 3:**
> I will _____
>
> Date started: Date finished:

> **Step 4:**
> I will _____
>
> Date started: Date finished:

> **Step 5:**
> I will _____
>
> Date started: Date finished:

Student: by signing below, I promise to create the best chapbook that I can. I will respect my teacher, my peers, and myself by using my time in this class to work hard, and to give this project my very best effort.

Teacher: by signing below, I promise to do everything in my power to support this student as they create their final chapbook.

Student signature: _____ Teacher signature: _____

RUBRIC FOR FINAL POETRY CHAPBOOK				
Criteria	**5/4**	**3**	**2**	**1**
CONTENT: *Poems* **X 2** _____ / 10	Poet demonstrates effort and attention to detail by including a variety of poems that use multiple poetic devices (vivid images, repetition, questions, characters, etc.). Poems go beyond the obvious and work to **speak in new ways.**	Poet includes four poems and pays some **attention to detail and variety**. Poems demonstrate understanding of poetic devices by using more than one device in each poem.	Poet has included four poems, but poems lack attention to detail, variety and poetic devices.	More than one poem is missing, or all poems are **making the same moves.**
CONTENT: *Artist statement* **X 2** _____ / 10	The poet gives a **meaningful explanation** of the **purpose** of their poems and their revisions. Reader is able to understand *why* the poet chose to write and include the poems. Poet relates their work and their understanding of poetry to what we have discussed in class.	The poet explains a purpose for their poetry and their revisions. They address a greater understanding of poetry, but this understanding lacks specific examples from the unit.	The poet gives the reader some insight into the overall purpose of the chapbook, but statement is lacking one or more components: may fail to relate understanding back to the unit, may fail to discuss the specific purpose of the poetry or revision.	The statement is off-topic or does not give the reader any information on why the poet chose to include these poems. The **reader does not have a better understanding of the chapbook as a whole.**
Evidence of revision: **X 2** _____ / 10	Poet has made changes in the poems from the first draft, in-class writing stage and revisions **reflect attempt to make poems more meaningful and powerful**. Poet uses **peer feedback** to create better poems.	Poet has made some changes in the poems and has clearly taken peer feedback into consideration. Some changes are minor or do not effect the meaning/purpose of the poems.	Poet has made revisions to some of the poems. One or two poems lack revision OR revisions are minor and do not make the poems more meaningful or powerful.	Poet has made few significant changes. Poet has not used peer feedback to improve poems.
Organization	Chapbook is arranged logically and includes all necessary components. Work is **presented with integrity.**	Chapbook contains all components but is poorly presented, or chapbook is missing one component.	Chapbook is missing multiple components or shows lack of concern for the **integrity of the work.**	Chapbook is missing multiple components and poet has not made an effort to present the poems with integrity.

Week 1. Lesson 1.

Pioneers! O Pioneers![13]
By Walt Whitman

1

COME, my tan-faced children,
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready;
Have you your pistols? Have you your sharp edged axes?
Pioneers! O pioneers!

2

For we cannot tarry here,
We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger,
We, the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

3

O you youths, western youths,
So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and friendship,
Plain I see you, western youths, see you tramping with the foremost,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

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[13] Whitman, Walt, and Malcolm Cowley. *Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*. New York: Viking, 1959. Print.

Week 1. Lesson 1.

The Road Not Taken   by Robert Frost[14]

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I marked the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

---

[14] Frost, Robert. "The Road Not Taken." *Poetry Foundation.* Web. 7 Oct. 2012.

Week 1. Lesson 2.

How do you Teach Poetry?   **By Adam Jake York**

Incredulous citizen, desperate colleague, you suppose no answer, or only one. Teaching committee, you want curriculum, want rule, want way.

Here is a syllabus.

Thoreau:

So thoroughly and sincerely we are compelled to live, reverencing our life, and denying the possibility of change. This is the only way, we say; but there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one centre. All change is a miracle to contemplate; but it is a miracle taking place every instant.

Here is a syllabus.

Students, let us not compel. Let us not reverence anything that does not justify itself.

I am less interested in your writing a *finished* or *perfect* poem than I am in your seeing *some* way toward a poem.

You want rules?

Insert Tab A into Slot B. Write a sonnet: fourteen lines, a volta, some application of syntax or sound to announce or witness the poem's turns of thought.

Now, ask not how this poem satisfies the idea of a sonnet, but where it forgets the sonnet. Where is this poem thinking of something else?

Thelonious Monk (via Steve Lacy):

A genius is the one *most like himself.*

Where does the poem become most like itself?

So, the poem: a thing (think, thought) most like itself.

I have done it, too. Here, this is the moment when I forgot the assignment.

When I began to improvise.

Improvise. Begin with a plan, but know the plan will change, that it will *have* to change.

Improvise, from Latin *improvisus*, "unforeseen," adding *in-* to *provisus* past participle to *providere* "to see ahead—more at PROVIDE" (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary).*

The poem will require what you cannot see. It is what you cannot see.

You improvise because something is not provided. You answer the lack of something: material, plan, rule. You work with what arrives, what's provided later, what was unforeseen.

So, you improve what was given and what is given.

So: false, folk, improvised etymology: *improvise*: to improve what's given, what arrives, what emerges.

So: the poem provides itself.

The rule got us started. Now let us reverence this. Not what could be compelled. Whitman:

it is not so impatient as has been supposed that the slough still sticks to opinions and manners and literature while the like which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the life forms…perceives that the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house…perceives that it waits a little while in the door…that is was fittest for its days…that its action has descended to the stalwart and wellshaped heir who approahces…and that he shall be fittest for his days.

Pay attention.

The syllabus is borne from the writing rooms. It was fittest for its days.

Now.

When you write, you allow something that did not exist, that could not be asked for exactly, to come into the world. You help that, which could not be provided or be provided for, to provide itself and to provide for itself. You help this language emerge.

You could get in the way if you're not paying attention.

Attend, from Latin, *attendere,* literally "to stretch to" (*Webster's).*

Quiet now. [15]

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[15] York, Jake Adam. "Now I will Do Nothing But Listen, to Accrue What I Hear into This Song, to Let Sounds Contribute toward It; or, a Pedagogy." *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook.* Ed. Joshua Marie Wilkinson. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010. 243-244. Print.

Week 1. Lesson 4.

Lady Lazarus by Sylvia Plath[16]

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it-----

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?-------

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The Peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot ------
The big strip tease.
Gentleman , ladies

These are my hands

[16] Plath, Sylvia, and Diane Wood Middlebrook. *Plath: Poems*. New York: Knopf, 1998. Print.

My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart---
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair on my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,

I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash---
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there----

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

Week 1. Lesson 4.

Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note[17]
By Amiri Baraka

Lately, I've become accustomed to the way
The ground opens up and envelopes me
Each time I go out to walk the dog.
Or the broad edged silly music the wind
Makes when I run for a bus...

Things have come to that.

And now, each night I count the stars.
And each night I get the same number.
And when they will not come to be counted,
I count the holes they leave.

Nobody sings anymore.

And then last night I tiptoed up
To my daughter's room and heard her
Talking to someone, and when I opened
The door, there was no one there...
Only she on her knees, peeking into

Her own clasped hands

---

[17] Baraka, Amiri. "Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note." *Modern American Poetry.* University of Illinois: n.d. 7 Oct. 2012. Web.

Week 2. Lesson 1.

 From **A child said, What is the grass?**[18]
By Walt Whitman

A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full
hands;
How could I answer the child?. . . .I do not know what it
is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful
green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we
may see and remark, and say Whose?

Or I guess the grass is itself a child. . . .the produced babe
of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow
zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the
same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

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[18] Whitman, Walt, and Malcolm Cowley. *Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*. New York: Viking, 1959. Print.

Week 2, Lesson 2.

The Tyger   **by William Blake**[19]

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? and what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

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[19] Blake, William. "The Tyger." *Poetry Foundation.* Web. 6 Oct. 2012.

Week 2. Lesson 3.

Uses for Spanish in Pittsburg   by Kristin Naca

What use is there for describing
Bloomfield's hard-sloping rooftops that way?
Or that the church steeples beam upward, inexpertly
toward God. What difference does it make
to say, the chimney pipes peel their red skins,
or *las pieles rojas*, exposing though steel underneath.

What good, then, for Spanish,
its parity of consonants and vowels—
vowels like a window to the throat,
breath chiming through the vocal chords.
And what good is singing to describe
this barrio's version on the shortened sky,
el cielo cortado—power lines crisscrossing
so high, that blue only teases through them.

And what for fog *la niebla arrastra*,
creeping down *las calles inmóvile*
before the bank and grocery stores open.
Y pol la zapetería on Liberty Avenue,   *And by the shoemaker's*
a lady's antique boot for a street sign.

What use to remember in any language
my father was a Puerto Rican shoe salesman.
From his mouth dangled a ropy, ashy cigarette.
He spoke good English and knew when to smile.
With his strong fingers he's knot shoes like *redes,*   *fishing nets*
knew three kinds of knots so lady customers
could buy the shoes loved to look at
but really shouldn't have worn.

At home, Dad kept his *lengua íntima*
to himself. His Spanish not for children,
only older relatives who forced him to speak,
reminded, *Spanish means there's another person
inside you.* All beauty, he'd argue, no power in it.
Still, I remember, he spoke a hushed Spanish
to customers who struggled in English, the ones
he pitied for having not language to live on.

So many years gone, what use to invent
or question him in Pittsburg? The educated one,
why would I want my clumsy Spanish to stray
from the pages of this book outward? My tongue,
he'd think so untrue and inarticulate. Each word
having no past in it. What then? Speaking Spanish
to make them better times or Pittsburg
a better place. *En vez de regresar la dura realidad*　　　　　*Instead of returning*
del pasado. And then, if I choose to speak like this　　　　　*to the hard reality*
who will listen?　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　*of the past*

[20]

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[20] Naca, Kristin. "Uses for Spanish in Pittsburg." *Bird Eating Bird.* New York: Harper Collins, 2009. 8–9. Print.

Week 3. Lesson 1.

Your teacher turns into an ant.
You squish your teacher.
Your teacher goes to heaven.
In heaven she falls out of the sky.
Your ant teacher comes back into the classroom.
She has knives. She throws one at you.
It shatters against the side of your head.
She throws another knife at the other side
of your head. Now you have a Mowhawk.

Ricky Mann (2nd grade)[21]

deer & salt block   **by Joshua Marie Wilkinson[22]**

One boy is a liar & says there's a block of salt under his bed to draw the deer in from the orchard. One boy says the pantry wall will open if you say an untold anagram of his name. One boy is already dressed when he wakes up for his father's wedding. One boy hides a turtle from his brothers in a dresser drawer. One boy is mute & sluggish from the hurricane sirens. One boy took a long time in the bathtub reading the comics. One boy loops a tractor chain to the ceiling fan & tears the whole roof down. One boy speaks through the keyhole to the others about a baseball player's hex. One boy can't stand the scent of elevators. One boy gives different spellings for his name each week at school. That same boy stole his teacher's shoe. Another boy listens to a radio inside his pillowcase. One boy drinks coffee alone in the zookeeper's shed. The last boy casts a purple stone to the bottom of the pond & follows it down with all of his church clothes on.

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[21] Collom, Jack, and Sheryl Noethe. *Poetry Everywhere: Teaching Poetry Writing in School and in the Community*. New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1994. Print.

[22] Wilkinson, Joshua Marie. "deer & salt block." *The Book of Whispering in the Projection Booth.* North Adams, MA: Tupelo Press, 2009. 22. Print.

Week 3. Lesson 2.

THE CREATION[23]
by: James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938)

AND God stepped out on space,
And He looked around and said,
"I'm lonely –
I'll make me a world."

And far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything,
Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in a cypress swamp.

Then God smiled,
And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on one side,
And the light stood shining on the other,
And God said, *"That's good!"*

Then God reached out and took the light in His hands,
And God rolled the light around in His hands
Until He made the sun;
And He set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.
And the light that was left from making the sun
God gathered it up in a shining ball
And flung it against the darkness,
Spangling the night with the moon and stars.
Then down between
The darkness and the light
He hurled the world;
And God said, *"That's good!"*

Then God himself stepped down --
And the sun was on His right hand,
And the moon was on His left;
The stars were clustered about His head,
And the earth was under His feet.
And God walked, and where He trod

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[23] Johnson, James Weldon. "The Creation." *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse.* New York: Viking, 1927.

His footsteps hollowed the valleys out
And bulged the mountains up.

Then He stopped and looked and saw
That the earth was hot and barren.
So God stepped over to the edge of the world
And He spat out the seven seas;
He batted His eyes, and the lightnings flashed;
He clapped His hands, and the thunders rolled;
And the waters above the earth came down,
The cooling waters came down.

Then the green grass sprouted,
And the little red flowers blossomed,
The pine tree pointed his finger to the sky,
And the oak spread out his arms,
The lakes cuddled down in the hollows of the ground,
And the rivers ran down to the sea;
And God smiled again,
And the rainbow appeared,
And curled itself around His shoulder.

Then God raised His arm and He waved His hand
Over the sea and over the land,
And He said, *"Bring forth! Bring forth!"*
And quicker than God could drop His hand.
Fishes and fowls
And beasts and birds
Swam the rivers and the seas,
Roamed the forests and the woods,
And split the air with their wings.
And God said, *"That's good!"*

Then God walked around,
And God looked around
On all that He had made.
He looked at His sun,
And He looked at His moon,
And He looked at His little stars;
He looked on His world
With all its living things,
And God said, *"I'm lonely still."*

Then God sat down
On the side of a hill where He could think;
By a deep, wide river He sat down;
With His head in His hands,
God thought and thought,
Till He thought, *"I'll make me a man!"*

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled Him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand;
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till He shaped it in His own image;

Then into it He blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.

Week 3. Lesson 3.

Creation Myth[24]
By Mathias Svalina

In the beginning there was nothing. But the nothing smelled like bacon. No one could figure out how nothing could: a) have a smell & b) smell like bacon.

Someone suggested that maybe someone who spends a lot of time working the bacon & who hasn't changed out of his work clothes was near. But everyone looked around & confirmed that there was no person who spends a lot of time working the bacon and who hadn't changed out of his work clothes nearby. In fact, there was nothing in existence.

Someone else suggested that perhaps nothingness was a kind of bacon. She put together a chart that showed that it was logically possible that nothingness was a kind of bacon & people listened to her lecture & nodded their heads but secretly they were all thinking about what to eat for dinner. They all wanted to eat some bacon. Some wanted pizza as well.

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[24] Svalina, Mathias. "Creation Myth." *Destruction Myth.* Cleveland, OH: Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2010.

Week 4, Lesson 1.

The Mysterious Human Heart   by Matthew Dickman[25]

The produce in New York is really just produce, oranges
and cabbage, celery and beets, pomegranates
with their hundreds seeds, carrots and honey,
walnuts and thirteen varieties of apples.
On Monday morning I will walk down
to the market with my heart inside me, mysterious,
something I will never get to hold
in my hands, something I will never understand.
Not like the apricots and potatoes, the albino
asparagus wrapped in damp paper towels, their tips
like a spark of a match, the bunches of daisies, almost more
a weed that a flower, the clementine,
the sausage links and chicken hung
in the window, facing the street where my heart is president
of the Association for Random Desire, a series
of complex yeas and nays,
where I pick up the plantain, the ginger root, the sprig
of cilantro that makes me human, makes me
a citizen with the right to vote, to bear arms, the right
to assemble and fall in love.

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[25] Dickman, Matthew. *All-American Poem*. Philadelphia: American Poetry Review,
        2008. Print.

Week 4. Lesson 2.

From *The Descent of Alette*   by Alice Notley[26]

"One day, I awoke" "& found myself on" "a subway, endlessly"
"I didn't know" "how I'd arrived there or" "who I was" "exactly"
"But I knew the train" "knew riding it" "knew the look of"
"those about me" "I gradually became aware—" "though it seemed

as that happened" "that I'd always" "known it too—" "that there was"
"a tyrant" "a man in charge of" "the fact" "that we were"
"below the ground" "endlessly riding" "our trains, never surfacing"
"A man who" "would make you pay" "so much" "to leave the subway"

"that you don't" "ever ask" "how much it is" "It is, in effect,"
"all of you, & more" "Most of which you already" "pay to
live below" "But he would literally" "take your soul" "Which is
what you are" "below the ground" "Your soul" "your soul rides"

"this subway" "I saw" "on the subway a" "world of souls"

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[26] Notley, Alice. *The Descent of Alette*. New York: Penguin, 1996. Print.

Week 4. Lesson 3.

From *Recyclopedia*   by Harryette Mullen.[27]

Of a girl, in white, between the lines, in the spaces where nothing is written. Her starched petticoats, giving him the slip. Loose lips, a telltale spot, where she was kissed, and told. Who would believe her, lying still between the sheets. The pillow cases, the dirty laundry laundered. Pillow talk-show on a leather couch, slips in and out of dreams. Without permission, slips out the door. A name adores a Freudian slip.

A Carafe, that is a Blind Glass   by Gertrude Stein[28]

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.

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[27] Mullen, Harryette Romell. *Recyclopedia*. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 2006. Print.
[28] Stein, Gertrude. *Tender Buttons*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1991. Print.

Week 5. Lesson 1

Sonnet 130   **by William Shakespeare**[29]

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
        And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
        As any she belied with false compare.

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[29] Shakespeare, William, and John Dover Wilson. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. London: Octopus, 1980. Print.

Week 5. Lesson 2.

The Sonnets: L   by Ted Berrigan[30]

I like to beat people up
absence of passion, principles, love. She murmurs
What just popped into my eye was a fiend's umbrella
and if you should come and pinch me now
as I go out for coffee
. . . as I was saying winter of 18 lumps
Days produce life locations to banish 7 up
Nomads, my babies, where are you? Life's
My dream which is gunfire in my poem
Orange cavities of dreams stir inside "The Poems"
Whatever is going to happen is already happening
Some people prefer "the interior monologue"
I like to beat people up

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[30] Berrigan, Ted. "L." *the sonnets.* New York: Penguin, 1964.

Week 5. Lesson 3.

This is Just to Say　　　　　**By William Carlos Williams**[31]

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet and so cold

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[31] William, William Carlos. "This is Just to Say." *Modern American Poetry.* Ed. James
　　　Baldwin, Joseph Coulson and Peter Temes. Chicago, IL: The Great Books Foundation,
　　　2002. Print.

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