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Kathy Dixon

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**FIRST STEPS TO NAMING THE WORLD:  
ACTION RESEARCH AND ACTIVE  
LEARNING OF POETRY**

**Kathy Dixon**

As a teacher-researcher in a Saginaw high school one Spring semester, I not only observed three teachers but also taught a week-long poetry "unit" while the regular classroom teachers observed me. We were engaged in "action research," in the sense the term is used in Goswami and Stillman's *Reclaiming the Classroom*, exploring whether, and how, it would make sense to teach poetry to their students and engaging in activities which were as much a way of teaching as a mode of research.

Students at Arthur Hill High School are tracked into four different levels of English. I worked with students in the two middle levels in one sophomore, one junior, and one senior class. About one-half to one-third of the students were Caucasian and one-half to two-thirds racial/ethnic "minority," with more Blacks than any other ethnic group; in addition the students could be described as a roughly equal mix of middle and working class. Some generalizable differences did appear in the students' responses to poetry that may be associated with gender or race or both, though that is not the focus of this essay.

**The Teaching/Research Process: Day One**

After forming a circle with our desks, we freewrote on the question, "What do I like and dislike about reading poetry?" I explained

freewriting to them as an activity much like starting a car on a cold morning—you want the engine to turn over and keep the parts moving or idling for awhile; you don't worry about performance. They were told not to worry about spelling, grammar, or formal constraints but simply to write whatever came to mind. They were also told that we would share some of what they discovered in this freewriting, and that I would record my own thoughts and share my writing with them.

As we expected, the students found more bad to say about poetry than good, though the good was there. In general, they disliked reading poetry, or at least certain kinds of poetry, because they found it hard work that doesn't yield much reward.

The most frequent negative comments regarded the students' inability to understand the poetry they had read. Vocabulary not meaningful to the students was one problem, particularly "difficult words," "words I don't understand," "words like 'thou' and 'shalt.'" The subject matter of some poetry was often alienating; one student disliked poetry he couldn't "relate to," while others disliked "old poetry." One sophomore girl put it succinctly: "I don't know anything about the grace of God or talking ravens."

Students also seemed to have certain expectations of what poetry is, particularly that it must rhyme. Several mentioned disliking poetry that doesn't rhyme, although even more said that what they liked about it was rhyme. Males were especially critical of poetry that was "unrealistic" or "insincere." One disliked "lovey-dovey" poetry; another the "poetry inside of Christmas cards." There was overwhelming rejection of

poetry whose “point” eluded the students; they didn’t like having to search for the “real meaning” and even charged that such poetry was “purposely difficult.” Some objected to having to read the same poem “over and over again” or disliked “poetry that goes on and on, with no meaning.”

The positive remarks had a similar range. Again and again, the students claimed to like poetry “you can understand.” The young women often admitted liking “love poetry” (and a couple of men seemed aware of this: one said he liked poetry that would “impress girls”). Most often, though, they liked poetry about “the writer’s feelings,” “poetry that matches my feelings,” and “funny” poetry. Appreciation for the music and expressive qualities of language were voiced often, especially by women: “I like descriptive poetry—sweet things that brighten up your day,” “the way words flow,” “rhymes,” “rhythm,” “hearing it read,” “rap music,” “poetry that sounds pretty.”

From what the students said they liked about poetry, I inferred their own potential for appreciating it. We probably could have learned more about the reasons the students had a poetry “problem,” but we now knew enough to begin teaching.

Reading Spenserian sonnets clearly was not the way to begin. Instead, I wanted to broaden the concept of “poetry” beyond emphasis on poetics: attention to meter, symbolism, imagery, focus on the poem as object, the artist-writer, and the academic critic. I wanted to get clean away from classroom anthologies and most especially those dreadful teachers’ guides that give “the answers”—or, as the students might say,

“the real meaning”—as if there is one meaning or a finite set of meanings available for any reading of a poem. Most importantly, I wanted “teaching poetry” to mean **producing** and admiring poetry of one’s own, learning to develop one’s own tastes and standards rather than passively accepting anthologizers’ judgments.

Kenneth Koch, himself a poet, taught poetry to New York public school children and to adults in nursing homes (1970, 1977) by shrewdly identifying the interests of each group and finding building blocks of poetic structure that would serve such “amateurs” in poetic self-expression. He read canonical poetry to them as “inspiration,” focusing upon those same elements he thought they could use when writing. His successes were stunning; I drew upon them for this project.

To ask students, or even ourselves, to write poetry, means that we have to forget about measuring up to New Critical aesthetic standards and to adopt instead “some sort of kindly amateur standard” (Elbow 112). The attitude fits well with Elbow’s advice to separate the creative and critical processes of writing so that they don’t interfere with each other. Viewed this way, we could think of the kind of poetry writing I am about to describe as the first step—the creative step—in a process that would eventually include critical revision.

### **The Teaching Process: Day Two**

The decision, then, was to get students involved in poetry by writing some. The actual procedure that I used comes in part from my colleague Richard Harmston, former public school teacher and now a professor at the University of Utah. He gave me a student-authored poem

entitled "A Personal Inventory" which I distributed and read aloud in a way that I hope showed my admiration for it.

A Personal Inventory

My mom says I am 14  
I disagree with her  
I believe in reincarnation  
I think  
I'm too old  
There are 7 in my family  
I like the color  
gray best  
horsebackriding is  
my favorite sport.  
I like the Beatles music best  
I play piano  
saxophone and recorder  
I never danced before  
because I'm scared of  
making a fool of myself  
My favorite author is  
James Foreman  
I get depressed easily  
and I love the  
word **definitely**  
and my 9 year old brother.  
I would like to be an  
architect  
but I'm flunking Algebra.  
I like expressing myself  
through art.  
I enjoy singing  
I never get enough sleep  
and I get too  
involved with my friends  
so they never have time  
to be  
themselves,  
I don't act  
like  
[author's name]

[author's name]  
9th Grade

After reading the poem, I told the students that at hour's end I would collect from them some poetry of this kind or any other (they didn't even have to call it poetry, if they didn't want to). I asked them what "inventory" meant (they knew) and then we began to consider what taking an inventory of oneself might mean. I encouraged them to freewrite lists of likes/dislikes—the sort of thing they saw in the ninth-grader's poem, to focus on specifics (I pointed out some spots both in the poem and in the introductions some of them had written the day before), to use active verbs as much as possible, and to get down at least 20 sentences. After that, I encouraged them to choose their favorite items and write them in short lines like the poem above, to find a good beginning (one way was to use the formula used in the ninth-grader's poem: "[someone] says \_\_\_\_\_, but I say \_\_\_\_\_", and a good ending. Otherwise, the arrangement was up to them.

Most of the students worked diligently on the assignment—all but one student in the three classes produced something. As they worked, sitting in the circle, they sometimes shared their poetry "bits" with one another; they were surprisingly willing to share them with me. Sometimes I would read them aloud softly and exclaim with real admiration, "This looks great! Keep it up!" With students who were stuck, I would suggest questions they might pose to themselves: "What do you like to do after school's out? What is a typical day in your life like?" Sometimes I would urge specificity: "You say here you like cars. Why do you like cars? Are there any particular kinds of cars you like better than others? A 'candy-apple red Monte Carlo'—I can really picture that!" In all three classes I had time to visit every student at least twice during the 50-minute sessions. About 20 minutes and again at about ten minutes

before the bell, I reminded them that they should get their "poem" into the form they wished to see it published in, for I had promised to type them all up (authors were to be anonymous unless they requested otherwise) and distribute them the next day for reading aloud in class.

**Poetry-Writing Results: A Few Poems**

I don't like rules  
and this government stuff  
has gotten way out of hand.  
I really can't stand T.V. Evangelists  
or Religious fanatics  
That's why I sleep in on Sundays.  
I just want to be left alone  
to do as I please.  
Listening to heavy metal.  
Playing my drums, partying  
and generally causing trouble.  
I hate Saginaw  
Its a boring town.  
I wish I could give everybody a driving lesson.  
Writing **this** kind of poetry is a breeze.

The students chuckled and murmured approval of this one and attempted to characterize the kind of personality behind its strong, authoritative voice. I pointed out that the sense of not liking rules seems to hold as a kind of theme for the whole poem. The students agreed. The ending, with its reference to the act of poetry-writing tends to take me outside of the poem, and therefore seems to me a fitting ending. We talked also about how we liked the cliché "...is a breeze." One reason I think I like it is because the clichéd predicate gets startlingly new life from its subject, writing poetry, which is hardly a clichéd activity in anybody's life. Is it good for students to think that a traditionally "difficult" subject like poetry "is a breeze?" My answer is that some kind



of motivation has to be present before hard work can be expected. What better motivation than the enjoyment of easy and fluent self-expression?

My mom says I am 17  
but I say I am older  
I like sleeping with my windows open  
cause I love the  
outdoors.  
I like riding motorcycles  
and being lazy

I love my Girlfriend  
[her name]  
I love to spend  
time with her  
I also like being  
with my dog.

I like the springtime  
and washing my car  
when its hot  
I also like the  
color blue.

Again the students liked this one. I wondered whether the opening lines, which derive from the model "A Personal Inventory," did much for the poem, but I admired extravagantly the strong sensory impressions it left me with. I especially enjoyed linking the fact that he likes to sleep with his windows open to his love for the out-of-doors (synecdoche?). The students approved of this author's honesty (he says he's lazy, for example). I wondered if that doesn't help to make the rest of the poem seem honest, too.

Some of the women appreciated the author's inclusion of his feelings for his girlfriend and the plain, direct way in which he expresses those feelings. "He also likes his dog," said one, and I asked, "What do you think about the dog coming after the girlfriend?" Some thought that

that meant his girlfriend comes first in his heart; others (myself included) thought it might sound a bit humorous, as though his feelings for both were about equal.

Friend

Some people think it good to dip & dap!<sup>\*</sup>  
I think people should learn to stay back.  
They ask's you things,  
then they change them around,  
people really like putting you down,  
and making [you] look nothing but a clown.

I think that you really have no  
friend. But it always look like it when  
you begin. But in time you will see  
A friend is someone you will never  
need.

So, when you think you have a  
friend Look around and think again.

<sup>\*</sup>dip & dap— always in someone's business

This student completely rejected the list idea and went in for rhyme and assonance. The critical leaders of this class loved the sounds of this poem, and I agreed that they were pretty ingenious, especially in the second stanza. I liked the “dip & dap” expression and explained that the author included the footnote at my request to help out readers like me. We discussed the idea of “stay[ing] back” and understood the phenomenon some friends experience of being too close. The students wondered if the second stanza, though, wasn't too cynical; I liked the sense of drama in stanza three, which to me seemed both ominous and humorous—humorous because it **was** such an extreme statement.

### Students' Evaluation of the "Unit"

All three teachers asked for written responses to the poetry unit. The best summary comes from a student: "In the beginning everyone thought poetry was boring, but in the end the majority thought it was o.k." As this implies, the responses were largely positive. Altogether, 57 students claimed to like the unit, 17 to consider it "ok," and five to dislike it. Qualitatively, the themes which occur most often are: 1) the students liked getting to know one another, 2) they liked expressing their feelings freely, 3) they liked having a "break" from regular class and homework, and 4) they liked understanding poetry better. On the negative side, some simply disliked poetry from the beginning and continued to dislike it. Also, some felt that sitting in circles and wearing name tags was like "being in preschool."

Since the poems were written by the students about their "personal inventories," it makes sense that they would consider the arrangement of seats in a circle, the group discussions and reading, and even the opening freewrite and sharing as part of one activity: that of getting to know one another better. Except for a few of the sophomores who found this "too darn personal," nearly everyone expressly enjoyed this, even those who still disliked poetry: "I liked it because I learned...what people [were] like, the way they were expressing in their poems...personally myself I hate Poetry."

Some seemed to have changed their minds about poetry **because** of the social situation. Many seemed to see poetry first as communication: "The poetry writing revealed a lot about the students in our class, like how they felt about certain subjects, what they had

planned for the future and for the present"; "I liked it because it helped me to understand some of the people in the class. I felt it brought out a different perspective in almost everyone."

The students also enjoyed the opportunity for free self-expression, and that enjoyment reflected on their feelings about poetry: "...it gave us a chance to express what we really felt about poetry. It also gave us a chance to write a short poem ourselves about our own personal feelings and not about the trees just us"; "...it was a lot of fun expressing how we felt about things, and ourselves....I wouldn't mind doing more poems"; "It was the most freely I have felt in class since elementary[.] I mean [I] get A's in some classes but still don't feel as free as I did..."; "I liked being able to express myself without getting checks."

Finally, a number of students found they enjoyed the actual writing of the poetry and felt they had learned something about poetry itself. Some enjoyed the ease with which they found they could write: "It made me enjoy something I really never liked. It was easy to me and I usually hate poetry"; "It was fun writing all those poems, too. Many people even said they couldn't write a poem, but they all were good."

Many linked the experience of writing and reading their own poetry to a better understanding of poetry in general. "I liked [that] what we did made me understand how poetry is made"; "I...got to listen to other peoples poems and some of them were so good you would have thought a real poet wrote it, but it was written by students"; "I think that now when I read a poem I will know to look at it from a different point of view"; "It was

like [we] learned about poetry by doing it ourselves, not that I like to write poetry, but even that wasn't so bad."

Most who did not enjoy the experience either thought that the subject and/or presentation were boring or beneath them, or didn't understand "the point." A couple seemed to feel inadequate: "I liked when we talked about the poems because they rhymed and made sense. But when it came to writing them I never knew really what to write"; "What I liked about the poetry unit was that there was a lot of poems that rhymed. What I disliked about the poetry was that making up my own poem that didn't make sense at all." It may be that these students feel a refuge in the convention of rhyme, since it really wasn't true that many of the students' poems rhymed. As regards their belief that poetry has to "make sense" in some traditional way or rhyme, I can only hope that we English teachers can help disabuse them of such narrow-minded attitudes, a consequence of which is their inability to enjoy expressing themselves through poetry and/or appreciate their classmates' writing. That, in my view, is a more pressing concern than their probable inability to read contemporary published poetry.

### Conclusion

Their three teachers and I agree that the unit was largely a success as a **first step** in teaching poetry and the writing process. Had I had more time, I would have tried to capitalize on what was begun in the critique session to give the students more opportunities to reflect on their values and the nature of their lives, bask even more in the satisfaction of effective self-expression, and consider ways of manipulating language more effectively. We'd look even more closely at

linguistic "seams," the ties, implicit and explicit, that hold pieces of writing together, and at devices for opening and closing. As we noticed and appreciated the sound of language, we might also discover some awkward or unpleasing spots and offer possible revisions. When we contemplated a reading audience, we might easily have focused on proofreading. (I typed the students' poems exactly as they came to me, and there were some deciphering problems.) Noticing the similarities between their poems and published poems would be essential if I intended to teach canonical poetry later.

Finally, I would have given them more opportunities for "naming the world," as Freire puts it. An English teacher's job, it seems to me, is to enable students to do what they most want and need to do with their language-using capacities and to provide encouraging guidance in that process. In the poetry unit, constraints were definitely provided, not the least of which was that the students were **required** to write. But freedom of expression was not hindered and there were no formal constraints. People want to write because they feel the power implicit in naming the world, grasping it and apprehending it for themselves, receiving public recognition for their thoughts (the students loved seeing their poetry in print), and persuading others through their words. Certainly student writers must learn to assess their audiences and address their needs, but without freedom of expression and self-chosen purpose (note that most of the students **wanted** to write about themselves), no one but a bureaucrat would want to write. And without a direct connection between one's living experience and the printed word, no one but a bureaucrat would want to read.

One week—or even one term—is not enough. Later, most of Sheila Smith's seniors told us they would not be reading literature or poetry after graduating. Hearing them talk was to remember what is wrong with the world. Very little poetry and literature that would speak to them in the way that their own poetry did exists, and they wouldn't know how to find it if it did. As one student wrote, "There are so many other things to do!" High school may not be prime poetry reading time, anyway. But will relevant poems and guides to those poems be available to the students later, as adults, when they might want them? Will they ever again be a part of a group of people reading poetry and literature together? Will they read it to their children at home? Will their children get to "learn about poetry by doing it" in their elementary, junior high, or high school English classes or will their teachers feel compelled to "cover" anthologized literature, vocabulary, spelling, and grammar drills instead?

Knowing what is really in our students' minds is often to be reminded of what stands against us as teachers. But that is valuable knowledge that only researching teachers are likely to get. What education ~~can~~ take place must happen with such knowledge and with the students' cooperation. I felt that that happened during our poetry week in Saginaw, and I join with one of the students in saying, I wouldn't mind doing it again.

#### NOTE

The willingness of the students to share their thoughts with me, a relative stranger, was due at least in part to the trusting atmosphere created by their regular teachers, Jane Denton, Sheila Smith, and Bea

Ugartechea, whose rapport with their students was often masterful. Special thanks goes to Sheila Smith for her valuable editorial advice.

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**Kathy Dixon is a student in the English and Education Ph.D. Program at the University of Michigan, a teacher-researcher for the Center for Educational Improvement Through Collaboration at the UM School of Education, and a writing teacher.**