

Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice

Volume 3

Issue 1 *Discussing the Convergence of Research and the Creative Arts*

Article 15

Fall 2004

A Choking Rooster Sings: Poems About Teacher Transformation

Mary Clare Powell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/jppp>

Recommended Citation

Powell, Mary Clare (2004) "A Choking Rooster Sings: Poems About Teacher Transformation," *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/jppp/vol3/iss1/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu.

A Choking Rooster Sings: Poems About Teacher Transformation

Mary Clare Powell

Introduction

It all began when I set up a little research study because I wanted to know the impact of our Creative Arts in Learning program on some of our teachers. Five were from a cohort in Gardner, MA (rural/small town) and five were from Boston Public Schools (urban). In addition, 11 teachers who had completed the program in Derby Line, VT were interviewed once about its impact.

Using a case study method, I interviewed each teacher and observed her teach about 3 times in two years of going through the program. They filled out questionnaires after each course. The names of the principal participants follow the article.

When I decided to extract poems from these transcripts, the changes in the inner lives of teachers came clearly into focus. Their poems, selected and edited by me, became the heart of my written piece. My prose, which surrounded their poems, was explanatory.

But I wasn't happy with this. I personally hate reading prose interrupted by poetry, even though I'm a poet. So I decided to make "poems" out of my own prose. Through this form, this dialogue between me and them in poems, taught me as I worked and re-worked them.

Poetry is slanted, it is metaphorical, and it must be read more slowly than prose and with an open heart. I'd love to hear from any readers about how this form strikes you.

I want to know:
What changed inside you
as you went through
this integrated arts
program?

How did you shift and morph
inside? And how do you
describe your pretty self
now?

The Choking Rooster Sings

By Chris Conner

During chorus class in 7th grade,
the teacher was trying to establish
sopranos, altos, baritones.

She set up a divider,
asked three children
to stand behind it
to sing the scale.

After my group, the teacher said,
and I quote,
Which one of you sounds
like a choking rooster?
The other two pointed at me.

From that day on I mouthed
the words when we performed.

I think it hurt so much
because I loved singing.
At home I would sing all the time.

I carried that hurtful negative
comment with me all my life
until this Master's program
when a special person, Louise,
changed my view
and gave back
what was destroyed 19 years ago.

She said Everyone can sing!
We were never forced,
and I eased myself
into all the songs.
After the two weekends
I was actually singing,
not mouthing the words.

Since then I have taught
many of the songs to my kids.
I even sing in front of parents

and colleagues.

Eleven courses
in Creative Arts in Learning
over 4 years--
poetry, music, curriculum theory,
visual arts, arts and society, integrating the arts
creative movement, arts and technology,
drama, storytelling, integrated project

To Fill the Space

By Kathy Barrett

I. Coming to Lesley was a rude awakening.
Sitting in class, I was actually being challenged
to think for myself,
to come up with my own thoughts.
It was very scary when I realized
I did not know how to do this.

For a long time I sat in silence
observing
what was going on around me.
When asked to contribute verbally
or through written work,
I found it very difficult to depend
only on myself,
no one telling me exactly what to do.

There was so much room for me,
but I was very unsure about how
to fill the space.

II. Unlike what I was used to,
the instructors were not looking
for one correct response.
All my life I've spent looking for
the right answer,
so afraid I would come up with

the wrong one.

I was called upon
to become involved,
to actively participate,
to think critically
and to be creative.

I soon discovered that people actually
wanted
to hear what I had to say.
My voice was being listened to.

The arts have stimulated not only my mind,
but my emotions as well,
involving
my whole person
in the construction
of knowledge.

Real learning has gone on,
and it has come from within me.
Predictably,
their lives were changed,
as well as their teaching.

What is of equal interest
are questions raised
by the process:

Can a poet be a researcher?
Whose poems are these?
Is it really poetry? Good poetry?
Why poetry?
Poet as a Teacher
I don't really trust research.
There, that's said.
A house of cards,
with one person's data,
valid or not,
used as a brick

in building another person's
new house.
And so on.

I love being a poet.
She doesn't sit for hours
Poring over words.
She wanders, she waits,
hunts for an experience,
opens herself to whatever comes along.
The poet sits and sits,
she sifts and sifts.

In the First Person

by Robin Williams

I didn't have a teacher
telling me about poetry,
I had a poet
telling me about poetry.

I had a dancer telling me
about dance.

That makes a difference—
a person's telling you
in the first person.

The teachers are real artists.
It makes art real.

The poet wants to see
how the arts hit them,
how they were changed
by the touch of the arts.
to see faces,
hear stories,
eyes gleaming,
voices rising with discovery,
to look at their art pieces,

Two Selves

by Shireen Samuel

As a child, I felt I had two lives,

my American self

and my Trinidadian self.

I had to always remember the correct self for the correct place.

I did not want to be made fun of so I kept my voice under wraps.

When you feel safe,

I think that is when you create.

Unshackled

by George Milkowski

I enjoy dance, theater and so forth.

But

I never considered myself a creator.

They do that

and I do something else.

It wasn't the piece of work we did,

it was what

I was going through,

that unshackled me,

not whether it was going to be beautiful

or artistically appealing

to everybody

or anybody.

The process I was going through

is what art is really about.

Whose Poems are these?

I am a poet who happened to be standing

in the way when a bunch of words
 were thrown out the window like bathwater
 and I recognized a baby.

Who is speaking?

Them.

I only chose and arranged,
 brought to life.

A midwife?

"Metamorphic transformation, the interpenetration of identities, is for many still at the heart of poetry" (Hirsch, 1999, p. 131)

Interpenetration sounds sexual--
 their identities as teachers
 penetrate my teacher,
 my identity as poet
 penetrates their poems,
 Mary Clare, researcher,
 put on the poet mask
 as she searched the data.
 They're not my poems,
 but I dug them out of cliff walls.

Transformations

by Mary Gagnon

They said
 in the beginning
 it was going
 to change your life,
 and it really did.

I never had been exposed to the arts, never had the opportunity
 to try them on for size.
 Something happens
 in the classes
 that I'm still thinking
 about
 at twelve o'clock
 that night.

I've become aware of
and learned to ignore
my inner voice that says
I look foolish,

and just to enjoy
the doing
of the arts.

I've really reached
into a part
of myself
that I hadn't
reached before.

I'm more relaxed

about where I am

and what I am doing

which has helped me

become

more articulate

in voicing

my educational philosophy.

I do feel that I'm more creative.

I actually apply the creative process,

I see that it's a real process focused in different media.

It's focusing inward

on what you can

pull up.

I see myself

as a POET now.

I get a lot of satisfaction

from putting my thoughts on paper
in a poetic way.
Each of my poems

feels like a little chunk

of my life

being set loose

into the world.
It is
very empowering.

I was able
to paint and draw
without being
self deprecating
about my work.
I just had a good time
without feeling bad
about my final product.
This was a
very new
experience.

I don't need anyone to affirm it.
I paint it, and I see a part of me.

that's all I need,

not somebody

to say

it's good or bad.

Singing, I'm much
more relaxed
than I was
--oh,

I say to myself,
you'll sing
even though
you don't sound
so great.

I considered
myself
awkward and ungraceful.

I always thought
I needed years of training

before I could dance.

Now I like the feeling

of moving in space,

of letting thoughts

be expressed

kinesthetically.

(I deliberately incorporate some movement into almost everything I teach now.)

I trust myself
as the source.
Outside approval
or even inner approval
doesn't seem
as much of an issue now.
I just enjoy the process.

I have always been audience,
always watching.
I enjoyed nice art,
nice music,
nice theater,
but now

I feel like
I can actually
produce things,
though it's not
museum quality.

It makes me feel good to do so.

Mainly,
this program

has made me feel

confident--

that what I'm doing
is OK,

not too weird,

not too bizarre,

that perhaps
I'm on the right track.
I trust myself.

IV. IS IT POETRY?

Uttered as prose,
words became poems
because a poet heard them,

extracted them like teeth
from a mouth,
laid them down on paper
in the shape of poems.

My process
a metaphor for how the arts
transform classrooms

because teachers
are transformed.

The poet tells the truth but tells it slant.
Speaks in “a voice”
other than her natural or social voice.
Strikes a pose,
plays a role,
reveals a truth while concealing. (Hirsch, 1999, p. 127)

Are they Good Poems?

I am not "in" these poems
and for this reason
doubt their worth,
don't recognize them as poems,
even though I have made them.

The poet wants
poems beautifully
and carefully done.
She knows how long
it takes to make
a good poem.

She is afraid
these poems
do not work
this way,
like teachers' doubts
when asked to create
songs or scenes or drawings.

Winding Back and Forth

by Peggy Bennett

The better you feel about yourself,
Dancing by yourself when you hear music is OK,
but suddenly you're good enough to dance in front of people.
The better teacher you are
If you look at a painting of mine,

you are seeing
a side of me I can show you now.
The better you feel in the classroom
I never thought I'd write a decent paper again,
but I did, and I said, Well, you did it.
the better your sense of self is reinforced.
I hated my voice when I heard it on tape.
But now I'm trying to learn stories by taping myself,

The better you feel about yourself,
I'm a ham, and I can ham it up. Go ahead, I say.
The better teacher you are
I can take a lesson I've created and publish it.
I look at teacher magazines and say, I can do that!
The better you feel in the classroom
I shared my poems with the 5th grade class
the better your sense of self is reinforced.
I could have been an artist in residence.

The better you feel about yourself,
the better teacher you are
The better you feel in the classroom
the better your sense of self is reinforced.

Why Poetry? An Average Joe

By Chris Conner

I felt my talents were nil
compared to my fellow teachers.
I thought I was an average Joe,
I just didn't feel whatever I was doing was good enough
to put on display or show other faculty.
I thought it was because I was younger.

But now I feel
I have
a lot
to offer
other people,

Once I do an activity

I'll share it with someone else
and before you know it,
it's going around the school.

I don't worry
about who's doing what
across the hall.

I realize if I look deep enough
inside
me
I
do
have
creative
resources,
and the children will benefit from them
and from me.

From poems,
will
the Teacher
Education
Accreditation
Council
know
how teachers grew from our program?
Will educators think poems reliable? Valid?
Will poems be at home
in the culture of evidence?
Will regional recruiters taste this research eagerly,
wanting to see which pieces can sell the program?
How will my colleagues see these poems?
Won't summaries
of what I found
make them just as happy?
I don't know.

I do know
poetry illuminates metamorphosis

Metaphor

Poetry traffics in metaphor,
the only thing big enough
to suggest deep changes.
Prose's laboring sentences
can't as easily corral transformation.

Poetry suggests,
then leaves it
to be filled in by readers.
Garlic Press
by Linda Newcombe

Basically the arts opened up my world
made it a lot bigger
and more fun.

It had the same effect
on my teaching
as well.

It's like a garlic press--
you squeeze it
and all this great stuff
comes out.

Poetry is a device for seeing
what's at the heart
of teacher learning,
or anything else.
And teachers feeling their power
cannot be schoolmarms.

Learning to Speak

By Pat McLynch

In the beginning,

I was terrified to speak
in front of a group of adults.

Then in Storytelling, Sharon said
at the end of the first weekend
that anyone who was nervous
could stay and talk to her.

I said

It won't do any good for me to stay
because no matter what you say
the day of, I will be nervous
because it builds up with me,
if I know I have to do it,
it works on me constantly.

Sharon asked how I was going to be in my class.
I said, I'm fine with kids.

I learned two stories
and when I was ready
I went across the hall.

And then I worked my way into third grade,
Mary and Peggy's kids--
their hands were flying up
the minute I finished
they wanted to tell me
what they'd heard in the story.

And then I did the other fourth grades
and then a fifth grade.

I felt like a celebrity by the time I told my story
in five other classrooms.
The children loved hearing my story.

I am often asked in the hallway
if I will come back to tell another.

Reading and re-reading transcripts,
forming and re-forming poems,

one day
the titles of their poems
on my floppy disk
showed me the metaphors
they chose to use,
and they were
metaphors of transformation.

From going through the program,
becoming a better teacher is a given,
but what,
has happened to her?
Not her the teacher, but her?
Herself,
her very self?

I asked, What changed for you?

They answered:
I am
Engaged
Unshackled
Stretched
Reaching inside
Stepping outside
Pulling out the whatever
Smarter in a different way

I am large
Comforted by the arts
Spilling over and stripping down
Filling up spaces and gaps
Standing up!

I say
I want this and I fear this
at the same moment.
I am a little amazed and a lot proud
I think..., I guess..., I am...creative

I Am Creative

by Itonya Dismond

I am creative,
yes,
I am creative
because I always
try to get myself
and the students
involved in music,
different music from Ghana.

The way I present myself is creative,

Teachers have to be creative,
not stick with one method of learning,
because the children are not one.

I Am an Artist

by Shireen Samuel

I'm learning to bring out
what I think
I already have
inside.

We keep ourselves from creating
when we say only
artists,
dancers,
or actors
do this

and the rest of us
are just meant to watch and appreciate.

That's just not the case.

VIII. RESULTS

Here's the juice!
Here's why I'm teaching!
This thing they are reporting,
is what I'm after
for other people
and for myself as well.
This keeps me alive.
Reach Inside Yourself
By Robin Williams

The instructors
make you reach
inside yourself.

It's very gentle,
it's very subtle,
but that's what's
been going on.

I realize what I have
to do for these courses:
I have to let go of control.
I have to be a child,
and if I don't,
I'm not going to get
anything out of it.

I have believed it
for many years:
first, the low-income women
in the projects of Chicopee,
our writing workshop.

Seeing them believe they were writers,
with something to say
and the power to say it.
Seeing them move out of public housing,
go to college, even get Master's degrees.
Seeing them reaching back for the women
still in public housing, and the children.

BE LARGE

by Marty Wakeman

When you take a drama course
and Stan tells you,

be large,

That's a different way of looking
at the world, to be large.
Not talking louder but being bigger.

It's not just your voice that gets large,

you start to feel large too,

It's a perspective thing that keeps popping back.

Before that,
studying ten women artists
working in clay, dance, theater, music, writing, visual arts
for my dissertation
how they shared artmaking
with homeless kids, troubled adolescents, small town citizens, elders.

I've been on this trail a long time,
and now I see in teachers
the same change happening:
the enlargement of the self,
the breaking of old definitions,
the belief in oneself,
the sharing of the new self.

Not As Cautious

by Robin Williams

Doing this degree
in Creative Arts
is one of the best things
I've ever done

for myself.
I've grown.
I've discovered
another
Robin
who is OK
with trying out new stuff
and not being afraid
of what others think.

I've increased
the boundaries
of my comfort zone.

“In poetry, identities are in process, selves are constructed out of words, line by line, stanza by stanza” (Hirsch, 1999, p. 130).

And these newly created teachers
are with many students
in many classes,
year after year,
and they never go back
to the way things were.

I Do Wish

by Mary Gagnon

I want
for the children
what I have described
happening to me
in the Lesley program.

I do wish
somebody
had taught me
that way
in elementary school,
that someone
had given me
that opportunity.

If teachers can change,
kids can change,
and if kids can change
education can change,
And if education can change,
society itself can change,
and if society can change,
life can change.

Through Them

by Stephen Gould, Principal

In helping teachers learn
to integrate the arts,
one of the first things
in all the classes
is to help the teachers
find
where
the arts intersect
with them as persons.

They're so trained to be teachers
that they come to courses looking for lesson plans,
but that route isn't the way.

The route is through them,
through bringing something alive
in them
and making some
connection
with an art form.

What follows from that flows naturally into the classroom,
and with their colleagues
because they have been
touched.

If schools are going to be
interesting places for kids,
teachers have to be people

who are capable of being
interested in things
themselves.

Teachers baptized as artists--
opened, stretched, spilled, filled,
pulled and tugged into new locations
within themselves.

They know what's possible,
they have a little peek
into what size humans can truly be,
and down what pathways
it is possible to go
while we are alive.

New Attitude

by Linda Newcombe

The arts helped me
form
a new attitude:

I'm willing
to try new things
and appreciate things
that are different.

Perhaps we need that attitude
in a multicultural society.

References

Hirsch, E.(1999). *How to read a poem and fall in love with poetry*. New York: Harcourt.

Research Subjects—Teacher Transformation

Gardner Participants

Chris Conner, kindergarten

Linda Newcombe, kindergarten

Helen Deranian, Principal, Bennett School

Peggy Bennet, 3rd grade

Mary Gagnon, 3rd grade,

Stephen Gould, Principal, J.R. Briggs School

Pat McLynch, 4th grade

Boston Participants

Valerie Almeida, 4th grade, Dennis Haley School

Stephanie Cousins, 1st grade, R.D. Roosevelt School

Itonya Dismond, 4th grade, John Marshall School

George Milkowski, teacher, Lesley on-campus student

Shireen Samuel, 5th grade, Mendell School

Robin Williams, kindergarten, F.D. Roosevelt School