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Introduction

What architect decided schools should have a separate art room down the hall? What a baffling blunder. Suddenly all art forms are perceived as “specials,” separate from the real work of education. A time for serious teachers to plan their lessons. An indulgence for kids who are already overindulged, or a nuisance for those scrambling to catch up. Poetry is relegated to an isolated two-week unit in May—if all other requirements have been fulfilled.

But, curriculum standards! Assessments! Tests and more tests! What about state and national standards? (Can world and intergalactic standards be far behind?) Teachers are pressured to see that all students achieve common goals. There are so many facts to digest at this point that we can’t afford just to sit around and make stuff up. It’s only logical to close the door on that art room once and for all.

Or is it?

Art is not dissimilar from history, mathematics, and science any more than poetry is dissimilar from other forms of writing. Every subject taught in school, when brought to its highest level, becomes an art form, be it geometry, biology, auto mechanics, or the study of language. The jumping-off place is that moment when the knowledge gained in our field of expertise carries us into the uncharted water of new ideas and we manage to stay
afloat, buoyed by what we’ve already learned. It’s true of the poet, the heart surgeon, the cellist, and that guy at Superlube who welds some metal together to make a part for eighty bucks that costs ten times as much from the dealer.

Creativity isn’t just making stuff up. It is using familiar tools to make something that wasn’t there before. It is a stew made up of three main ingredients—knowledge, confidence, and leisure time. And though you may get a different response from a ballerina or a mathematician, it is my job as a poet to say that we can offer these ingredients to students through the study of poetry in all content areas.

By integrating poetry into classrooms, we can learn about history firsthand from the people who were there. We can use words to define mathematical equations and scientific conclusions. What good is a scientific discovery if it can’t be put into words and published? By studying poetry, we learn another language for love besides the expletives we hear on the street. We encounter emotions like anger, sadness, or loneliness expressed in ways we can understand. This goes well beyond the state standards...
and my mind was spinning after a forty-five-minute writing lesson that had us all panting at the bell. As an afterthought, as I reached for my water bottle, I asked, “So what’s this list all about?”

Kris patiently pointed out the boldface heading. These were the “Kentucky State Standards,” and she had them posted on the wall. Clearly, Kris was not directing the grim death march to the annual test I had witnessed in some other schools. Her classroom was alive with enthusiastic students, jumping with questions and eager to try out new approaches to writing. Kris explained what had prompted her to post the standards in her class: “It was a combination of a guideline from my principal, Mrs. Calhoun, who wanted us to have our program of studies for the State of Kentucky visible and handy at all times and a need to offer a visual aid to my students. I want my students to be able to connect our objectives for the day to a visual image. I emphasize how these objectives connect to our core content and program of studies and direct their attention to the colored cards as I explain the exact standard being dealt with in that unit or lesson.”

“Oh,” I replied (sometimes I’m just over-the-top with this poetic eloquence thing). “And poetry fits in there?” I gaped at the numbered list. So many items.

Kris explained some more. “Poetry opens a world of sensory experiences in any content area and should be used to reinforce every subject taught, so connecting standards to poetry just makes it easier for everyone to use that form of writing.”

“Oh!” Now that was cool. Encouraging kids to write poetry based on standards issued from the state. Very cool, indeed.

And the impetus for this book. I went back to my poetry writing workshops and looked at them with a different eye. Could the writing of poetry be incorporated into classrooms not in addition to meeting the standards, but for the very purpose of meeting them?

To study poetry is to study language, powerful language. Poetry is both concise and precise, two of the most important elements of effective communication. Anytime we say, “I saw
what I saw and it looked like this,” that is a poem, as well as an essential tool in all academic disciplines.

I worked in public relations for many years, both as a writer of press releases, brochures, reports, and speeches and as a supervisor of other such writers. On the side, I was writing my poetry. A hobby, of course. But the most amazing thing started to happen. The more sand-kicking, arms-crossed, boo-boo-lip poems I wrote, the better my speeches became, the better my press releases became, and the more promotions I received. In reflection more than a decade later, I can attribute my business success directly to—of all things—poetry. Why? Because the language of business is extremely precise, as the warranty disclaimer for any product will attest. When this requirement for precision is coupled with the limitations of column inches or thirty-second sound bites, knowledge of the poet’s distilled language is a definite asset.

Of course poets also go looking for the truth, which may or may not be a useful skill in public relations, but that’s another issue.

I believe in functional poetry. Much like functional pottery, this is poetry that holds water. It makes sense to keep it around. It does something for us. Makes a connection. It doesn’t just sit there on the shelf and look mysterious. Art for art’s sake is a silly philosophy that relegates us to that room down the hall in which we run the risk of losing our connection to the real world. I would argue that art is for the sake of everyone. Art, poetry included, should be an intramural event, not simply a spectator sport.

The poet uses words as a means to an end, but that end is not simply the poem. The end is the impact the poem has on the writer and his audience, her audience. That audience may be a single friend, a classroom, a nation, or just the poet. We write poetry to make our individual ideas heard, and these ideas must not be limited to language arts class, another silly idea. When we succeed, when we create a poem that serves as a bridge toward understanding, that is communication—an indispensable standard of learning.
Exactly how can poetry help kids “get it”? Here are some reflections, personal and professional, on how poetry can be a practical route to learning.

**Writing Poetry Jogs the Memory.** For me, sitting down to write is like stringing a popcorn necklace. I have to hunt around my memory for the pieces, taking extravagant care to arrange in a certain order, then I remember something else and have to unstring. Working my memory over, I prioritize, make order out of chaos, rediscover details, and put events in sequence. Poetry is a practical route to learning and remembering.

**Writing Poetry Demands Keen Observation.** Most students suffer from some kind of “decibel damage,” whether from horror movie soundtracks, video game bells and whistles, boomboxes, or the evening news. Assaulted by so many stimuli at such volume, they have become highly skilled at turning off and tuning out. A survival mechanism of the modern
age, this is also a detriment to human and environmental consciousness. Writing poetry forces us to relearn the preschool adage “stop, look, and listen,” to take in details that are essential to future scientists, historians, lawyers, moms, convenience store employees, and community members. We want students to do more than watch—we want them to see. Poetry is an eye opener.

**Writing Poetry Requires Precise Language.** Whether it’s because we’ve become so used to listening to and speaking in media sound bites or are simply inundated with too much information, our language is becoming less concrete. We need words not only to articulate feelings and observations, but also to think clearly. Kids are way too inclined to talk in generalities: “you’re bad,” “that’s awesome,” “this sucks.” Yeah, but *why* does it suck? Because it smells like that washcloth you left balled up beside the tub? Because it has less energy than a dead battery? Because, because, because . . . Poetry eschews the ready-made phrases that make up much of the dialogue kids watch on TV or learn to pass off as conversation. It enriches our vocabulary as we reach for the dictionary to find just the right word. *I saw what I saw and it looked like this.* Poetry asks the important questions and forces us to define ourselves in concrete visual terms.

**Writing and Performing Poetry Stimulates Good Communication Skills.** What good is knowing something if we can’t communicate our ideas to others? If the best I can say for myself is a mumbled “What I did was great” while looking at my toes and kicking the dirt, no one will ever award me a grant for further study, hire me for the job of my dreams, or listen to my recommendations. Today we are inundated with mass communication, mass media, mass emails—the masses blaring and blasting at one another. Poetry remains the voice of the individual. It is naturally journalistic, expository, and persuasive. Because a poem reflects the writer’s...
personal feelings or observations, that writer works carefully to craft the phrases and images necessary to do the job. This fact alone can change the tedious panning for just the right word into a gold rush. Writing poetry is like making funny faces at ourselves in the mirror; we’ve all tried it, but don’t often talk about it. What a pity, because talking about it is what communication is all about. Encouraging students to share poems with one another—during poetry readings, at coffeehouses, on webpages, and in literary journals—spurs them to refine their writing. They will work harder at making themselves understood if they have an audience. Poetry encourages writers to be precise and concise—two of the most important components of good communication.

**Writing Poetry Encourages Good Organizational Skills.**
The writing process is one of observing, brainstorming, sorting, and prioritizing. We observe a universe of concepts, perceptions, and sentiments and then narrow them down to precise examples that prove the point we want to make. We form patterns and images out of chaos, thereby honing our ability to organize thoughts—take a jumble of ideas and impose order. Whenever something doesn’t make sense to me, I reach for a pencil and paper to try to make order out of whatever confusion is swirling between my ears. Never having been a very organized person (understatement alert), poetry is my lifeline.

**Writing Poetry Encourages Reading Fluency.** Poems are like potato chips; one munch is never enough. Poems beg to be reread. Whether it’s light verse from Ogden Nash or a serious rap testament of Tupac’s, typically we whip through a first reading, blink or giggle or gulp, and read it again. And if we like the poem a lot, we share it with a friend. Poems want to be read again and again.
Writing Poetry Helps Us Learn About Ourselves and Our World. Reading is trickle-down learning; writing is building our own learning curve. Studying about the migration of the pioneers, the realities of slavery, the violence in our society, or the war in Iraq (Rowanda, Bosnia, Korea) means mastering some facts long enough to be tested on them. Writing a poem using the factual knowledge gained in history, science, math, or current events lessons places students in the action. Likewise, writing poetry about inner wars and joys helps us determine what we like, what is true, and what makes us uncomfortable. All of these lessons enhance our growth as people and community members. Poetry helps bring the world into focus, helps us understand, express, and seek a solution—invaluable lessons for students of any age.

Poetry—Written, Spoken, or Read—is Powerful Language. Poetry has been a jungle gym in my life, a place to stretch and flip, climb to the top for a look-see, and occasionally fall and skin my nose. Poetry is so interwoven with my life that it is difficult to separate my experiences from my writing. And that’s the gist of what I have to share with you, really—how I went about stringing necklaces, making faces at myself in the mirror, and swinging from monkey bars to find myself and my poetic voice.

My earnest hope is that the exercises in this book, modeled on my own learning and teaching, will help you and your students find your own respective voices. And that thus finding your own way into writing, you won’t need me anymore except as an audience. Blow me away. I can’t wait.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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