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Maybe Poetry Isn't So Bad After All

Melissa Engels

When I heard we were starting a poetry unit, I was bummed.

—Derek

I think I don't really like poetry but I don't really hate it. I'm so/so for poetry.

—Wesley

It seems to be a waste of time to me.

—Corey

Do I really have to teach poetry? Maybe no one will notice if we skip this unit.

—Melissa

I have a confession to make. Even though I am an English teacher, I could have made any of those comments eight weeks ago and, in fact, the last comment is one that I voiced often when preparing to teach poetry.

Let me explain. I decided to become an English teacher because I love words. I love to see how language has an impact on people and their world. I love reading and writing. Well, I loved reading and writing, as long as it wasn't poetry.

As a student at every level, I disliked poetry. It was ok in third grade when we wrote haikus and rhyming ditties for the school's yearly Fine Arts booklet. I don't remember doing poetry in middle school, and "Elegy in a Country Church-

yard" is my only poetry memory from high school... probably because I had to give a presentation on it. College was much worse. Having a published poet as a professor sounds exciting, but, for me, it resulted in a renewed hatred for poetry. I wanted to read poems and just enjoy the language in them. Everyone else in the class seemed more interested in out-doing each other and impressing the professor with grandiose interpretations of each poem we studied.

That was my last experience with poetry until I was hired to teach eighth-grade Language Arts. Before the school year began, I met with the department chair, also an eighth-grade Language Arts teacher, and found out that we taught literature by studying genres—including poetry. Yikes!

I dreaded it all year and put it off as long as I could. I spent a lot of time preparing, poring over poetry resources and gathering lesson plan ideas from the other teachers. I taught the poetry unit and my students all survived, but it lacked something. I wanted to figure out the answer to that nagging question: How do you create and foster in eighth-grade students a positive perspective toward poetry? I vowed to do a better job the next year—maybe I could even have a positive outlook on poetry, too.

Getting Started

My goal for this year was to immerse my students in poetry and see what happened. I be-

gan most class periods by sharing some of my favorite poems, written by both published poets and former students. Usually, my students couldn't distinguish between the two, which showed them that they, too, had potential as poets. Then, we would jump into the day's activities.

I started the poetry unit with a survey. I asked questions about their feelings and attitudes toward reading and writing poetry. As I read their responses later, I saw that while some students were excited about poetry, the general consensus could be summed up as "Poetry sucks." They didn't understand poetry. They were frustrated when they had to write poetry because they didn't know what to write about or couldn't make it rhyme and use the right number of syllables per line. Only a few students could identify a best poetry experience.

Suddenly, the students began to see poetry in a different light.

I opened the floor for discussion. In each class, a few students tentatively shared some thoughts about poetry, but the conversation took off in second hour when Derek said, "We know lots of poets. Isn't rap poetry?" Yes! Music is poetry and poetry is music! Suddenly, the students began to see poetry in a different light. If their favorite Limp Bizkit and N'Sync songs were poetry, maybe this unit wouldn't be quite as bad as they thought.

The music connection was further made when we talked about poetry terms. The words refrain and chorus were part of the poetry terms that students took notes on. Discussing poetry terms allowed me to give students the language to use during our poetry study. It also gave me a chance to point out examples of poems and direct them to poetry resources that would be helpful during the unit. Although a few terms were new to them, students found that they actually knew most of them already.

At the time of the poetry unit, I was taking a graduate class called "Teaching Writing." We

had just finished reading about Nancie Atwell's Writing Territories activities. When creating territories, students make a list of topics they could write stories and essays about. Thinking back to the pre-unit surveys and the students' comments about the difficulty of finding something to write poems about, I decided to try the territories idea. I created my own list of "Poetry Territories" and spent a class period talking through my list with the students, sharing stories about my life that could be told in poetic form (Appendix A). As I talked, students started their own lists and later shared them with each other.

Collecting Poems

I don't really remember studying poets.

—Katie

Most poems are hard to understand and don't make sense. Who wants to read something like that?

—Elise

Now armed with ideas for writing, the students thought they were ready to write. Not yet. I wanted them to spend some time looking at poetry and seeing different ways of using form and language to express meaning, so I introduced collecting days. Students had to "collect" poems that they liked. The media center specialist wheeled in a cart overflowing with poetry books for the students to use.

Collected poems could come from many sources: books, Internet sites, song lyrics, or poets who were not published. Students had to write down each poem exactly as it was in the book and include bibliographic information. Shel Silverstein and Edgar Allan Poe were some of the only poets students were familiar with before the unit, so students were required to search for new poets and new styles.

The kids were skeptical at first, but it didn't take long before the room was silent except for the sound of pages turning and the occasional laugh or contented sigh. After a few days of collecting, it became apparent that it was working. Students came in asking, "Is it a collecting day?" They were

fighting over books and sharing new favorite poems with each other before class. Popular books included *Poems and Songs of the Civil War*, *The New Kid on the Block*, *American Sports Poems*, several editions of *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*, and anything from Shel Silverstein and Robert Frost.

Just Write!

I don't like it when we have to write about a certain topic. I like to write about whatever I want.

—Abby

I really do not like to write poetry because it is confusing with all the rights and wrongs.

—Greg

The time finally came when the students were ready to write poems. The procedure for each writing day was the same. Using Atwell's mini-lesson format, I introduced two or three types of poetry. I then let them write for the rest of the period. They could try writing one of the forms I introduced, or do their own thing.

I reminded students each day to look at their poetry territories to see what topic would fit the type of poem they wanted to write. While the poetry territories were helpful to most students, I still heard cries of "I don't know what to write about!" from some of my less motivated students. I worked with these students, talking through their territory list with them to nudge them in a direction that would allow the poetry writing process to begin.

The room was virtually silent on writing days, save for the occasional conferring with a classmate over word choice or trying out how a poem sounded. At this point, the students knew that they would be creating a poetry book, but they didn't know any details. I wanted it that way. I wanted them to feel complete freedom during the initial writing stage. We would integrate these poems into the poetry book's requirements later. I told them to "just write!"

Danielle and Kristen tired of writing their own poems, so they collaborated to write a poem for each of their teachers. They made several trips

to my desk, trying out the poems and proudly presenting me with their finished poem about me.

A Teacher at HEART

*All the way from Washington
Came a teacher you had to see
Brought up in a family of four,
She was always busy and out the door.*

*But now she's here hopefully to stay,
Even though we leave her in June,
There are many memories of her we will consume.
In spite of being a little small,
She has the biggest heart of them all.*

We Have To Make A What?

When students had a substantial collection of original poems, I decided it was time to explain the anthology assignment. We talked about what the word anthology means: a collection of writing by different authors. Their books would be anthologies because they would include both the poems they had collected earlier from published sources and the poems they had written themselves.

I heard the usual complaints that are voiced any time I explain a new assignment. Students thought this was way too much work, but I pointed out that half of their work was already done. Some students were upset that they had not been given the requirements before collecting and writing. I purposely waited to give the specifics because I found that last year, when the students knew exactly what needed to be in the anthology, they focused their efforts on meeting only those requirements. This year, the students freely immersed themselves in the world of poetry and stretched themselves as poets—they could enjoy poetry.

I don't like people reading my poems because sometimes they are stupid and don't make sense. If I didn't have to . . . have anyone read it, then I would be fine.

—Jamie

Now that they knew what the end product would look like, it was time to revise the original poems. I have found as a teacher of writing that students are extremely resistant to revision. They think that what they have written is already good enough and don't think any changes need to be made. With this in mind, I took them through three different revision activities from Joseph I. Tsujimoto. They first revised with a partner. They exchanged papers and had to completely rewrite each other's poems, using different words, tones, perspectives, and forms.

The next two activities were in the category of group revision. The first was "Group Feedback." Students took turns reading their poems to the group, who just listened. Following the reading, the group wrote down answers to two questions: What is the poem's main idea? What emotion do you feel? The poem was read again, after which the group answered two more questions: What words/phrases stick in your mind because they are effective? What would you work on if the poem were yours? The group then gave its feedback to the reader and went on to the next person.

The students really enjoyed "Circle Revision." They numbered the lines of a poem they wanted comments on and stapled a blank piece of notebook paper to the poem. The poems were passed around the circle, with respondents choosing two lines of each poem to revise. These lines were identified and rewritten on the attached notebook paper. While some changes were large, many were on a word level. Once the students figured out the procedure, it actually went quite well. I tried to sit in on each group for a while to guide them through the steps and hear the poetry conversations happening.

I want to write a good poem that means something to me and the people around me (friends).

—Elise

Elise achieved her goal during the revision stage. In second hour, Elise's poem about a football game in the snow was the one everyone wanted

to read and try his or her hand at revising. A few weeks earlier, our team of students went to Muskegon State Park and enjoyed a day of winter sports. A large group of students, both boys and girls, started a football game on the ice rink just as the snow started to fall. At the end of the game, they posed for a picture. This picture became the source of inspiration for Elise's poem. The students all felt like they were a part of the poem because of the shared experience at Muskegon. Elise told me how she worked so hard to get the poem to show how everyone felt during the game.

As always, students did not have to use the suggestions from others, but I found that the students were open to some revision after these activities. I also gave them a checklist to use as they worked on the final versions of their poem—how to take what everyone had suggested and put together a poem of which they could be proud.

The next few days were workdays in which students could do whatever they needed to do to complete sections of their anthology. Most students worked vigorously on these days; I only had to prod a few students to work. I allowed some students to type in the computer lab, although most students chose to type at home and do non-typing tasks at school.

Justin, The Resident Poet

The workdays also became a place for sharing poems. No one was more anxious to share his poems than Justin. New to the school, he was a student who received resource room services. He wasn't the brightest kid in the class and had a goofiness that most other eighth graders had already outgrown, so he had created the persona of class clown for himself. Classmates often exchanged glances and snickered whenever he had something to say.

I was surprised, then, when he came bursting into my classroom one morning before school. "Mrs. Engels, can I read my poem to the class today?" My first inclination was to discourage him from doing this, not knowing how the class would react. But he was so insistent, that I relented and

told him that he would need to ask the class's permission since he would be taking up their workday time. Even though this wouldn't occur until seventh hour, he visited my room after every class to talk about reading his poem.

Seventh hour finally came, and he asked the class if he could read his poem. "Is it the monster one?" called Carley, a member of his revision group.

"Yep," Justin responded.

"Oh, you have to read it!" came the reply. This approval from a popular student was all the class needed, so Justin launched into the reading of "Monster."

Monster
I tiptoed in the hallway
as quiet as can be,
I went around the corner
to see what I could see.
There was a figure lying
all blue, yellow, and green,
He was lying there all sappy
like nothing I've even seen.
See he was snoring really loudly
So I couldn't get any sleep,
that's why I came over here
because I wanted to count sheep.
All of a sudden he rolled in his sleep
it scared me half to death,
'cause I thought I'd be dead meat.
I walked over slowly
with a flashlight in my hand,
and also for a helmet
I had a baking pan.
I tiptoed over quietly
about to hit him on the head,
when he woke up all of a sudden
and I found it was my dad.

The class erupted in cheers and laughter as he read the last line while I sat in shock, marveling at how the class clown had suddenly become the class poet. The genuine praise from the class is a moment I will never forget, and I bet Justin

won't either. In the workdays that followed, Justin was the person students would go to if they needed help with revision or couldn't find the right word for their poems.

Poetry Presentations

The week before anthologies were due, students gave short poetry presentations in which they shared poems and gave some analysis of those poems.

Garrett's presentation confirmed what I had begun to suspect as the unit progressed. The students' attitudes toward poetry and themselves as writers of poetry were undergoing a change. Before reading his original poem, Garrett suddenly stopped, looked up, and said, "I really like my poem. It was fun to write because I could write it about whatever I wanted." With that, he plunged into the reading of his poem, after which the audience broke into applause.

Garrett's unsolicited and spontaneous honesty and his attitude toward poetry was just one of many times during the presentations that I realized poetry wasn't so bad after all. Almost every presentation was followed by compliments from the audience about how great a poem was or requests for copies of poems. Students were taking pride in their poetry, and their classmates validated these feelings.

With just a few days left before the anthology's due date, we wrote invitation poems. The idea is to write a poem welcoming readers and introducing them to the poems they will find in the anthology. Each collected and original poem in the anthology is somehow mentioned in the invitation poem. Students struggled with this for a few days, not because they didn't understand how to do it, but because they wanted to find the perfect way to introduce their anthology. Revision after revision occurred, and finally some satisfied students emerged. Derek no longer sounds "bummed" about studying poetry!

Invitation Poem

*Come inside and see,
All of the poems within me.
Most of these poems are well writ,
You should read them when the room is well lit.
Some are about football and food,
One is about clouds and a peaceful mood.
A few are about insects and a worm,
I wrote a lot during this school term.
One poem is written on school and one on a chair.*

*It gave me quite a scare,
When I found out about this poetry book,
I just had to go and look
For awhile, I had nothing,
So I wrote a poem about "nothing"
A young girl wrote about her dad
And all of the talent that he had.
One of my collected poems has humor
I hope there isn't a rumor
About me thinking poetry isn't sweet,
I think it is very neat
And lots of fun
My poetry writing has just begun!*

—Derek

Welcome to the World of Secrets

*Come into the World of Secrets,
Where stories are waiting to be read.
Follow me, and you will see
But only if you are willing to be led.*

*We will pass through
Many different places
Of sports, and Florida, and of a boy who
Is only smart enough to tie his laces.*

*Of foolish tricksters
Trying to trap a duck,
Or into the land of love for a wife
Who he found with all his luck.*

*Into the land of excuses
For not going to school,
And for the consequences
Of breaking all the rules.*

*On towards secrets
Between best friends,
And the dedication of one to another
Where their love never ends.*

*And in the sea of sayings
That are a hundred years old.
Yet they don't mean a thing to some
And should be left in the cold.*

*Into yearnings for a simpler life,
By love so deep it makes you cry.
And the feeling to know that someone prays for
you.
And someone there to watch over you, why?*

*Because past all the words
Through all the meanings, in a tiny hold
Lies a secret known to very few, where I'm taking
you
To the Secrets of the Soul.*

—Becky

*My best experience with a poem is last year I
wrote a poem . . . my friend and I entered it in a
poem contest and now it's in a big fat book of
poems. I'm proud of myself.*

—Lindsay

Shortly after the presentation, I received information about a local poetry contest and passed along the entry forms to my students. They were excited to consider the possibility of someone giving them prize money just for writing a poem, and the thought of being published in a literary magazine enticed many of them to enter poems in the contest. I overheard several conversations that involved students encouraging each other to enter

this poem or that poem in the contest. Students who just a few weeks ago did not consider themselves poets were now dreaming about winning poetry contest!

Poetry Picnic

At the beginning of the week in which anthologies were due, I gave each student a personalized invitation that invited them to a poetry picnic that would be held on the anthology due date. Students had to bring three things to the picnic: their anthology, a decorated poem written about a traditional picnic food, and a snack to share.

They were a community of poets and apprehensions about poetry were gone for the day.

The day before the picnic, I reminded students of what they needed to bring the next day. I decided to test them and made a joke: "The most important thing for you to remember tomorrow is your food for the picnic." They didn't miss a beat—"What about our anthologies? Isn't that the most important?" They were ready to turn in their projects and some of them seemed almost hurt that I even jokingly put the food ahead of the anthologies.

When students arrived on Friday, the desks were pushed along the walls and blankets were spread out in the middle of the room. We began by reading our picnic poems and creating a colorful bulletin board display complete with cutout ants and checkered picnic "blankets." Then we passed around anthologies. Students were eager to share their books with each other, and questions and compliments flew around the circle: "That's a cool title!" "I love this poem." "Can I have a copy of this poem?" I just sat back and watched these exchanges, smiling to myself. They were a community of poets and apprehensions about poetry were gone for the day.

As we sat on the blankets munching on our snacks, students could read poems aloud to the class. Many requests were made, and no one declined to show off a poem. In third hour, someone

commented on the three smiling trees that Phil had drawn on the cover of his anthology. He said that it went with a poem in his book; would we like to hear it? It turned out that "Tree Trio" was an original poem about a tree orchestra that the normally reserved Phil had written and was willing to read.

We ended the picnic by gathering for group pictures. Students who usually hide from the camera proudly smiled and held up the anthologies that represented almost two months' worth of hard work.

Evaluating Anthologies

Poetry With No Limits. A Dozen Roses: Poetry on Dreams, Life and Love. A Girl's Thoughts are Poetry. 480 North 880 West. Potpourri: A Book of Poetry. The Window to Steve. A Peek at Poetry. Life in the 21st Century. Rhythmic Readings. Secrets of the Soul. My Favorite Poems . . . and one about a Duck. The 14-Day Sit-in.

These anthologies and more were now in my hands. Grading them was actually quite easy. The required content was either there or it wasn't. I didn't "grade" the original poems. I don't believe you can grade someone's creativity, especially in poetry because there really are no rules. As long as students met the line requirement for original poetry, they were fine.

Despite the ease in grading, I spent hours on the anthologies. I found myself drawn into each book. I would sometimes spend twenty minutes reading a book, amazed at the poetry my students had written during the unit. They wrote poems about friendships, and sports, and vacations. They wrote poems about how hard it is to grow up. They collected poems about their interests: hunting, animals, and sports. They included song lyrics and poems their family members and friends had written. I truly believe that the anthologies provided a glimpse into who my students are. Sometimes I didn't even have to look at the name on the book to know whose it was, just from the collection of poems inside.

I knew the students were anxious to get them back. Every day after I collected the anthologies, at

least one student in each class would ask, "Did you grade our anthologies yet?" Students would come up to me after class to ask if I had read a certain poem yet and what did I think about it. Others wanted to know if I had figured out where their title came from. Wesley, who at the beginning was "so/so for poetry," chose the title, 480 North 880 West. As it turned out, that is the location of Isle Royale, the topic of one of his original poems. Seems like more than a "so/so" effort to me!

Usually I dread handing back work to the students because they always dispute the grades and disagree with my comments. Handing the anthologies back to the students was fun, however. They soaked up my comments: "I like the poem about ____." "A fantastic collection of poetry!" "Great job at showing your personality through poetry." The best part was that not one student wanted to argue a grade with me.

Parent-teacher conferences were the next week, which allowed me to share the poetry anthologies with parents. In our district, eighth-grade students participate in student-led conferences, which means that they attend the conference with their parents. The students are responsible for discussing their own achievements and compile a file of their work as evidence of their progress. I took great pleasure in watching the presentation of anthologies; the pride in the students' voices and the looks of admiration on the faces of parents were worth the time and effort spent teaching poetry.

Reflections

The next week, I asked the students to respond to some follow-up questions about the poetry unit to see if any feelings and attitudes had changed. Again, I asked them to be honest. Their responses told me that my goals for the unit had been met in most cases, and surpassed in other cases. Even the reluctant poets had to admit that poetry wasn't so bad after all.

My feelings toward poetry have drastically

changed! I absolutely disliked poetry, but now I love it!

—Robin

The best part about the poetry unit was writing, and publishing our own poems.

—Greg

I actually enjoyed writing poetry for the first time in my life. There was one poem that I wrote that I was very proud of.

—Kristin

I have a better appreciation for poets.

—Danielle

I knew that Shakespeare was good, but not this good!

—Vanja

Some poets I have discovered were in my class. I saw that kids were pretty good in our class.

—Anonymous

I learned that there are no boundaries in which I need stay.

—Kristi

I think that poetry is interesting and I have a lot of respect for authors now because I know how hard and frustrating it is.

—Anonymous

The best part of poetry studying was writing our own.

—Paul

I think I have some talent for poetry. Everyone says my poetry's pretty good.

—Jessica

I . . . learned that I am better at poetry than I thought.

—Phil

The poetry unit lives on, even though it is over. Two weeks after the poetry unit ended, students did a free-write about their most vivid memory from sixth, seventh, or eighth grade to prepare for

their next class project. Michael had this to say:

My most memorable memory occurred when I was in 8th grade. That memory was when I received my Anthology Book Project back . . . my grade was 200 points out of 200 possible points. I was so joyful . . . I had taken so much time to write and think of what types of poems I wanted to write. While I was creating my Anthology Book I had so much fun doing it.

The poetry unit was challenging for students, but they came away with satisfaction, pride, and a special book to keep forever. For students who don't love poetry, the unit may have been a little long. Everyone completed an anthology, however, which was not always the case with major projects assigned earlier in the year.

I was continually amazed at what a little freedom and a lot of encouragement did for my budding poets. As for me? I believe that I learned much more than I taught. I learned it is possible for eighth graders to feel positively toward poetry, even love it, or at least tolerate it. Immersing them in poetry, both their own and that of others, allows them to interact with the language on a personal level and takes away the idea that there are, as Greg wrote, "rights and wrongs" to poetry. Poetry can be a great way for adolescents to explore and express themselves.

Perhaps most importantly, I found out that poetry really isn't so bad after all. I was even inspired to write my own poem to share with my writing group in a graduate class and am already looking forward to next year's poetry unit!

Notes

1. Many of the activities described in this article were shared with me by Catherine Stovall and Gloria Lee, eighth-grade Language Arts teachers at Northern Hills Middle School.

2. My eighth-grade students at Northern Hills Middle School deserve special thanks. I truly appreciate their enthusiasm for the poetry unit, support for this research article, and willingness to

have their poems and survey responses published.

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Appendix A

Mrs. Engels' Poetry Territories

- Family
 - What they mean to me
 - Memories of specific family members
 - Funny things about them
 - My house
- Washington
 - Favorite places
 - Memories
 - What it's like to go back there after moving away
- School
 - Why I am a teacher
 - What I teach
 - Stories about my students
 - Testing

- Reading
 - The dreams that always happen in August
- Baseball
 - Seattle Mariners
 - Our hobby of visiting stadiums
 - Describing a specific moment in a game
 - Winning 2 state championships in high school
- Holidays
 - Getting the Christmas tree with my dad and sister
 - Stockings
 - Playing "Hungry, Hungry Hippo" with my cousins
 - Easter egg hunts
 - Thanksgiving dinner at Disneyworld
- Vacation Spots
 - East Coast
 - Florida
 - Mexico
 - Washington, D.C.
- Music
 - Concerts I've been to
 - Taking piano lessons for 11 years
 - Why we could never sign up for orchestra
- Favorite Foods
 - Chocolate: cravings, favorite kinds, why I keep eating it even if it's bad for me
 - French fries: a trait inherited from my dad
- Jobs
 - Proofreading school handbooks
 - Co-workers
 - Summer school for migrant children
- Scrapbooking
 - My supply wish list
 - Why I do this
- Exercise
 - Why I hate it
 - Treadmills
- My husband
 - How we met
 - Letters during college
 - Things about him I love
 - Things about him I live with

- Church activities
 - Youth group
 - GEMS Girls Club
 - Praise team
 - Dad printing the bulletin—going out for donuts
- Family Pets
 - Our fish: naming them, how they died
 - Snake: my plotting to kill it
- Friends
 - Memories of individual friends
 - Things we've done together

About the Author

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