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Images and the Lake: How to get teenagers to write real poetry

Dan Holt

When I first started teaching writing over 20 years ago, I was smothered in an avalanche of student poetry that was neither fresh nor original. My students wrote poems filled with the teenage angst, with vague notions of alienation, love, and the general unhappiness they felt was proper for poets. In addition, because our town is on the shores of Lake Michigan, their poems were filled with references to that great body of water. The lake, in those early poems, was always beautiful in a haunting, poetic way; and my students flung their adolescent bodies into that lake, both literally and figuratively, until I thought I too would drown in their miseries.

It didn't take me long to figure out that I had to do something to induce my students into some new topics, or, at the very least, into some new writing strategies that would give a little originality to their old topics.

The first thing I did was discuss the difference between concrete and abstract language, and I started insisting that my students deal with the concrete. I told them if they wanted to write about the lake, they had to make their descriptions appeal to the senses. They could include lines in their poems about the awesome force of the lake only if they showed images of overturned boats and the special damage this immense body of water can inflict on the shore and the homes on the shore. In short, I told them they had to show

and not tell, that their poems had to be before they could mean.

We read the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Charles Simic, Richard Brautigan, Robert Bly, William Stafford, May Swenson, and other professional poets, and I reproduced student poems published in good college and high school literary magazines; we noticed how those poets never told us what to think but gave us lots of things to think about. And then, when we were filled with the images from these poems, I told my students to stop trying to write poetry and to start writing the truth by accurately recording what was going on around them. I also told them to do this without rhyming or attempting to make their lines fit a definite syllable count. I told them the only definition of poetry that I believed in was that "Poetry is anything you can get away with." That made them smile and started a river of wonderful verse that is still flowing, enriching the lives of this community with its imagery and ideas.

I also discovered that if I wrote with my students and then shared my work in round-table seminar discussions, they seemed more willing to read their own poetry aloud and more willing to accept constructive criticism from each other and from the teacher who was having a little trouble with his own imagery.

This workshop attitude has developed a community of writers in our school. Students now share their work freely and either accept or reject sincere rewrite suggestions. And most importantly, the students are writing a lot and writing to be read. We now publish our own literary magazine, which is regularly labeled as "Excellent" in the annual NCTE listing of high school literary magazines. We also send our work out to scholastic writing contests and do quite well. My students are surprised to find that others, people they have never even met, find their writing worth reading and often worth publishing. This poetry experience, I firmly believe, has made my students lifelong writers, readers, and lovers of poetry.

The writing assignments and tasks I have used and am still using to encourage this authentic poetry are not original. I've gotten my ideas from books and former teachers and sometimes from colleagues during conferences I've attended.

The first strategy I employ now when I meet a new writing class is to have the students keep a writing notebook. Some teachers call this a journal or writer's sketch pad. I call it a daybook because we write in it every day. I don't grade the writing in these notebooks or even read it; but I sometimes ask volunteers to read what they have written. I, of course, write along with the students and can be easily persuaded to read my entries. The idea is that writing is a skill and can not be improved without constant practice; and writing, even the 10 minute variety, can be read aloud and enjoyed.

The daybook also gives students a place to write badly and to understand that writing badly is necessary, if only to clear the way for those occasional inspirations for which all writers live. I tell my students, when they are writing in their daybooks, to ignore the mechanics and handwriting and get as much down as quickly as possible. They are often surprised at what they can write when they're not so conscious that they're writing.

The following poem came from a daybook entry; in particular, from two lines that surprised even the writer. Can you pick out the lines?

GRANDMA

A smile of greeting, and another line is
added to the already age-wrinkled face.
Bony arms, with skin sagging, reach out
to welcome me.
A kiss on the cheek, barely felt from the
thin lips.
I notice she's shrunk again.
I wonder how small she'll be the next time.
Her weak, scratchy voice strains the ears
to hear what's spoken.
All the while, she stares toward me,
her eyes straining to see beyond the gray.

Diana Holub

The lines that inspired the poem are "I notice she's shrunk again/ I wonder how small she'll be the next time." Diana simply pulled these lines out of her notebook and wrote a poem around them. We often spend time in class reading our daybook entries, discovering the nuggets that can be fashioned into finished pieces. Students who base their poems on these types of discoveries very seldom write the typical teenage poems I alluded to in the beginning of this essay.

In addition to searching our free writing for poetry ideas, we also manufacture poems in a variety of ways, one of which I learned from contemporary poet Sharon Olds. In one of a series of programs produced for public television entitled "The Living Language," Sharon has her students list five nouns, five action verbs, and five adjectives. Once the lists are complete, she selects a topic and asks the students to write a poem using all the words in the lists— if they can. This assignment forces students to utilize words they wouldn't normally use for that particular topic and helps them forge some strange and surprising images based on unlikely combinations. The following is a poem written by one of my students last year who was "forced" to use his lists in writing a poem about one of his hands.

GYPSY EYES

My hand lies here, inviting description.
Its jagged lines run this way and that,
darting.
Why do I see only lines
when mysterious women with
dark complexions and rings
see so much more?
Do straight lines mean I'll ace my chemistry
test,
or do they mean I'll be hit by AIDS at age
twenty-four?
My palm is uncharted territory,
craggy mountains with deep, dry gorges and
gullies-
my gaze is drawn onward.
I pause to peek into the lake that is my
birthmark,
but I see only brown.
I search the furry meadows of my knuckles
for a sign of life, but all the animals of my
future
wish to hide.

Bill Kreamer

This approach helps the student realize that writing is an act of discovery, that good writing is never exactly planned, and that at the heart of every good poem is a surprise—for the reader and writer. He also learns that a poet writes because it is only through the act of writing that he discovers what he knows.

I found another useful approach is to provide the students with poetry books and have them read just the first lines of poems until they find one that intrigues them. They then write that line down as the title of a new piece, which they write beneath the title. Often the title is changed later, but it's the inspiration we're looking for. If the student decides to keep the title, he simply provides a footnote to give credit to the original author. This technique has the added benefit of

introducing the problem of plagiarism and how to avoid it.

By the way, it's important that students read only first lines because a complete reading of the poem would make an original and different poem impossible. After the student has written his own piece, it's fun and instructive to read the poem that inspired the student version, noting differences and similarities. The following is a poem written this year by a student, using the first line of a Larry Lewis poem as the title.

MY POEM WOULD EAT NOTHING *

Please just one more modifier.
Absolutely not, I'm on a diet.
I want to lose five stanzas by spring break.
But you're only an iambic tetrameter. You look fine.
I don't care. I want to be as thin as that trochaic dimeter
on the cover of Poetry Monthly.
You're just trying to impress that Haiku you met at the poetry meeting last night.
Can you blame me? He had the sexiest syllables
I've ever seen.
Don't worry. If he's a real poem, he'll like you for
your meaning, not your meter.

Sarah Reybuck

This piece is a far cry from the gooey teenage love/suicide/alienation poems I encountered when I first started teaching writing. Now, 20 years later, my students amaze me with what they can produce if given just a little direction and a fertile environment. And, yes, many of my students are still handing in poems about the lake. But nowadays that lake is apt to be an authentic one: a very wet, cold, and, yes, beautiful body of water on whose shores sit teenage poets engaged in the act of telling truths.