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Helping Students Discover the Long O in Poetry

William Palmer

Suppose you have been teaching students how to read and write poetry. Students seem to understand most of the basics: that poems are focused and condensed, that they contain carefully chosen images and details, that poets use line breaks to emphasize certain words, that poems express truth in “slant” ways as Emily Dickinson described. Now you want to help students discover the emotional power of sound in poetry.

To begin this, before you explain anything, you can simply dictate two lists of words (Perrine 191) and have students write them in their notebooks:

A) fat, red, rim, cot, dun

B) fate, reed, rime, coat, dune

Ask students, “What’s the difference between these lists?” Students will readily say that list A contains short vowels while list B contains long vowels. “Which vowels resonate or echo the most?” The long ones. Yes. “Umm, why are long vowels important in poetry?” Don’t answer this question. Just let it hang in the air for awhile.

On the chalkboard write Lucille Clifton’s short poem “africa” in which she addresses the country of her ancestors:

home
oh
home
the soul of your
variety
all of my bones
remember

Read the poem out loud. Then invite students to read it out loud with you. “What do you notice about sounds in this poem?” Somebody will comment that Clifton uses several long **o** vowels. You can underline them on the board. “Why do you think so many of these words contain long **o**’s? What do these sounds do in this poem to help it as a poem?” Invite students to speculate, but hold yourself back from answering your own questions.

How should we as teachers help students appreciate sounds in language? Should we present a fifty minute lecture, using an array of examples from classical and contemporary literature? Or would a discovery method of instruction be more useful to students? The esteemed psychologist Jerome Bruner has argued, “Insofar as possible, a method of instruction should have the objective of leading the child [student] to discover for himself” (*On Knowing* 123). Discovery learning enables students to construct knowledge on their own. This helps them remember it. When we tell students what we have discovered, we rob

them of the possibility of realizing it for themselves.

What has helped me most in teaching the importance of sounds—especially the long **o**—is sharing with students a letter I found one day in my local paper, *The Morning Sun*. A bereaved mother wrote to her son who had died five years ago that day. I simply ask students to read the letter; I don't mention anything about sounds. Here is the letter:

Just When I Thought I Had It All . . .

In Memory of Spencer K. Clark, Nov. 17, 1968—Sept. 20, 1986

MY DEAR SPENCE,

Five years, that sounds like such a long time but it still seems so recent. If I really concentrate I can still hear your voice. I hope that never leaves.

Spence, you left me with so many priceless memories. I want to take this time to "thank-you" for sharing so much of your 17 years with me. I always felt like I really knew you. I can smile over some of the memories and cry over others.

I remember the time you worried about eating crab legs at the Ervin's and how humorous the outcome of that was. Thank-you Spence for sharing that. I often think of the time you came home from school with a rose for me "just because." Thank-you Spence. Oh, I know you often thought of me as a little "goofy" but I always knew you liked me for your mother.

I'll never forget the time I was so ill with pneumonia and you would get up in the middle of the night to check and see if I was okay. Thank-you Spence for caring. Most of all "thank-you" for giving us the special friendship we have with Amy.

You know Spence sometimes I think you were an old soul. You touched so many lives in the short time you were here. Oh, I know there is no perfect person but damn, you were close.

If there ever is a life hereafter, I sincerely hope I can have the privilege of being your mother again.

Love, Mom (Joyce Clark)

After students have read the letter to themselves, we discuss their reactions: while the letter moves many students, its sentimentality bothers

many others. I accept all reactions and try not to judge any.

"Why did Joyce Clark write this letter? What was her purpose?" I ask. Some say she needed to write it for herself—it helped her deal with her loss; some say that she hopes her son will somehow read or hear her words; some say that she wanted the people in her community to pay attention to her words, to remember to appreciate their own children while they are here.

"What does Joyce Clark do with words to help her achieve her purpose?" I ask. Some students point out that she repeats "Thank you Spence" which makes her sound sincere. Others point out that her use of specific examples gives readers a sense of the person Spence was: thoughtful and loving. Then I tell students, "Please read the letter once more, this time locating a paragraph which resonates with long **o's**."

Most students find the second to the last paragraph, and many count the number of long **o's**. I ask students to write down (below the letter) why they think that paragraph contains so many of these sounds. Most students comment that the long vowels help convey a tone of intense sorrow and love. The letter builds in its emotional power, and students see that the repetition of these vowels helps produce this power.

Then I ask students to take that paragraph and to write it as a poem with line breaks. This activity helps students hear and think about long vowels and see that prose can contain found poems. In this way, doing teaches. John Dewey argued that successful teaching methods "give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking, or the intentional noting of connections; learning naturally results" (181). When students finish, they share their versions with one another. One of my students, Wendy Brown, wrote the following:

You know Spence
Sometimes I think you were an old soul
You touched
So many lives in the short time you were here
Oh, I know
There's no perfect person

but damn
you were close

Wendy begins two lines and ends three lines with long **o** sounds, natural places for emphasis. She uses keen line breaks that suggest interesting meanings. Making "You touched" as one line suggests that Spence fully experienced his physical sense of touch as well as his capacity to affect many people. Wendy's next line "So many lives in the short time you were here" suggests that Spence enjoyed more than one life—again conveying the idea that he lived life fully in his seventeen years.

At this point, after I have tried to enable students to discover the long **o**'s in Joyce Clark's letter, I try to explain briefly why this pattern of sounds is significant. Toward the end of Joyce Clark's letter, her prose becomes poetic. It resonates in sound as well as meaning. The **o**'s reinforce her emotions. Joyce Clark did not intend to use eight long **o** sounds in those three sentences. The emotional power of the long **o**—as seen in Lucille Clifton's poem "africa"—occurs naturally in language, not only in poems.

"Would you agree," I ask, "that the long **o** sound echoes sorrow?" Most students nod their heads yes. I try to relate this idea to their own experience. "Think of a time when something terrible happened—when some pain or tragedy struck you or your family or other people. What did you say?" If no one volunteers an answer, I tell students that when my father died unexpectedly, I repeated, "Oh. Oh God." I tell students, "When we repeat 'Oh' it is as if the sound helps us release pain, helps us breathe."

But the long **o** conveys more than one emotion. I ask, "If the long **o** echoes sorrow, does it echo the opposite of sorrow as well?" Many students arrive at the idea of joy, and I ask them to give some examples, which they do: "Oh, I aced the exam!" "Oh, I won the contest!" "Oh, I received a letter from my boyfriend today!" Yes. We exclaim "Oh!" as kids when we receive our dream bike. When we are older, we say "Oh" more quietly when we gaze at a newborn or a purple sunset.

The power of the long **o** happens when writers repeat the sound and when the sound helps resonate meaning. This musical pattern, this form of assonance, is not a fixed rule. It is variable. William Stafford said, "There are surprises in syllables, rhymes too subliminal for embodiment in rules" (*Australian Crawl* 79). The long **o** is a string of notes that helps language become poetic by reinforcing emotions. Most students don't recognize it unless we help them.

To supplement the lesson on the long **o**, you might share some poems with students and see if they notice the pattern. The last lines of Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish" convey the speaker's excitement at catching a "tremendous" fish and deciding not to keep it: "everything/ was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!/ And I let the fish go." In William Carlos Williams' "This Is Just to Say," he tells his wife the plums he ate that she was saving were "delicious/ so sweet/ and so cold." In "Nothing Gold Can Stay," the **o**'s help make Robert Frost's lines resonate with a sigh: "Nature's first green is gold,/ Her hardest hue to hold./ Her early leaf's a flower:/ But only so an hour" (Perrine 167).

Yet the long **o** pattern echoes emotions other than joy or sorrow. In Emily Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," for example, the last stanza conveys the speaker's cold fear at seeing a snake: "But never met this fellow,/ Attended or alone./ Without a tighter breathing/ And zero at the bone" (Perrine 52).

Is my method of helping students discover the long **o** utterly simplistic? Perhaps. But simplicity is a virtue for teaching and learning, Bruner argues. In *The Process of Education*, he claims, "The foundations of any subject may be taught to anybody at any age in some form" (12). The long **o** activity relates to what students already know. The "oh" feeling is concrete; students have experienced it themselves countless times.

Is the long **o** worth knowing? Bruner cites two criteria for whether any information is worth knowing (*On Knowing* 109). First, it should give people "a sense of delight." In my experience students delight in recognizing simple patterns that help them enter and appreciate the complex world of poetry. One of the reasons the long **o** is

simple is that it utilizes the contrast between sorrow and joy.

Second, the information should enable people to use it—and to travel or generalize beyond it. From knowing about the long **o**, students start paying attention to other sounds, whether long or short vowels, rhyme, or alliteration. They get a feel for the music of language. They develop a stronger sense of the ways sounds can affect meaning. Knowledge of the long **o** increases “the learner’s ability to grasp, transform, and transfer what he is learning” (Bruner, *Toward a Theory* 49).

After I use Joyce Clark’s letter in class, I simply invite students to pay attention to sounds—especially long vowels—when they read and write poems. My student Wendy Brown wrote a poem (untitled) in which she used several long **o**’s:

Mountains of diapers
Piled like **old snow**
Cold drafts **blow**
Over broken tiled floors.
She **holds** one more
On her hip,
Intimate with sour milk, am**monia**,
Lysol and **soap**.
Feel the tired **drone**
Of a lullaby.
The rocker **groans**
And another **cries**.

In a process log following her poem Wendy wrote, “I felt a real sadness for my mom and her experience with having so many babies so quickly. Though she never complained that I can remember, my heart was full with heaviness for what must have been difficult times.” Wendy transferred the lesson of the long **o** into her own writing.

After students explore the long **o**, I write the word “poem” on the board and ask, “What is the dominant vowel in this word?” If I’m lucky, many students smile. Because a poem usually expresses some emotion like sorrow or joy, it seems appropriate that the word contains the long **o**.

William Stafford claimed that poetry invites “from the hearer or reader a certain kind of attention” (41-42). The long **o** activities I have described help students develop an attention toward sound and sense. Language is full of “little bonuses” Stafford often said (109). The long **o** is a little bonus. As teachers we can help students appreciate the art of poetry by enabling them to discover the long **o**.

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