Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 11

Issue 1 *Focus: Poetry, Tough to Teach or a Treat
for Students?*

Article 8

1995

De-Mystifying the Window

Gloria D. Nixon-John

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Nixon-John, Gloria D. (1995) "De-Mystifying the Window," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1551>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

De-Mystifying The Window

Gloria D. Nixon-John

At a recent dinner party, a well-respected Michigan educator approached me, pulled me aside, and said, "Gloria, I want to thank you for changing my life."

A year or two ago I might have been taken aback by such a compliment, even embarrassed by such praise. Instead I lowered my glance in order to disguise my lack of excitement, and said something lame like, "Oh really...how so?" And since I knew what she was going to say next, I had to resist adding, "Let me guess...."

"That poetry exercise you did at our workshop last summer, I think you called it the Window Exercise, it changed my life, truly!" she whispered. "I was going through a difficult time and it seemed to help me focus...."

It wasn't that I doubted her, or that I wasn't grateful for her kindness. It is just that I have begun to feel as if I am part of Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show, which for a variety of reasons is a less than comfortable role for me. Yet, it is true, a seemingly simple poetry writing prompt that I designed in order to help my students tap their life experience and find their own voice has had dramatic consequences for my students as well as for the colleagues with whom I have shared this technique.

People approach me in restaurants and shopping malls and ask, "Are you the Window Lady?" And I get several calls a year from teachers and

district writing coordinators who ask, "Can you please come and do the window?"

I usually respond, "It is not the only presentation I can do."

"But we want the window," they urge.

No lie, I have traveled from Pittsburgh to Portland "doin' the window," and I have distributed the Window Exercise to so many students and teachers that I imagine it out there like Vonnegut's ice nine. Still, the requests keep coming.

At this point then, I think it appropriate to explain, as well as de-mystify, the window exercise once and for all. I also wish to discuss why I think the exercise works as a writing prompt inclusive of some of the possible sociopolitical reasons it has caught on nearly as fast as Barney or Power Rangers. Know also that I have designed a sequel prompt, which you can obtain in its entirety by calling my new 900 number (1-900-WINDOW).

First of all, here is the exercise. Keep in mind that I stop at the point in the text (where I have double spaced) to allow the audience to write for a few minutes (or longer). I suggest you get paper and pen or power book out and try this exercise for yourself. Or if you are a doubting Thomas, take it to school tomorrow and try it out with students.

THE WINDOW EXERCISE

Think about a window in a place that has some significance in your life. It may be a window of the past. Visualize the window.

Decide if you are standing inside or outside of the window (in other words, are you looking into a place or out of a place?).

Title the piece either: **"Inside Looking Out"** or **"Outside Looking In"**

Close your eyes if closing your eyes helps you to visualize the window. Imagine that you are standing by the window and select one object on the other side of the window that has some special meaning to you or that you just enjoy for some reason or another. Describe that object in one line or less. The line need not be a sentence.

Next ...

Imagine that you open the window enough to hear the sounds on the other side more clearly. Describe these sounds in one line or less.

Open the window a bit more. What do you smell on the other side? Describe what you smell in one line or less.

Stretch your imagination now and pretend that you can reach out to touch anything you want to touch on the other side of the window. Touch it. How does it feel? Write one line or less describing how it feels.

Taste the object you just touched on the other side of the window (whether it is edible or not). How does it taste or how might it taste? One line or less, please.

Now as a final step ...

Pretend that the window is gone or that it never really existed. Write a line or two about your life without the window.

Of course, my window exercise is simply a guided imaging experience. And I probably should warn that such exercises have been and sometimes still are under attack as too "New Age." Some may argue that imaging borders on hyp-

notic suggestion makes students deal with and share very personal experiences that are sometimes painful. But there is nothing really new about creative imaging. My window exercise is just a bit more guided than many.

Yes, sometimes recalling past experiences and writing about such experiences can be painful. And yes, the window exercise has caused a few students to shed a tear. But I have also had students cry while watching *Romeo and Juliet* or while reading *Of Mice and Men*, so I doubt that the technique is any more responsible for tears than any other reflective or emotive educational experience. And, while I don't pretend to be a psychologist, I do know that in my life the pain that I bury deep below the surface keeps bubbling up to the top until I finally deal with it through thoughts and words, and that for me dealing with issues is usually better than ignoring them. Also, in all of my experiences with the window exercise, I can honestly say that this prompt leads to as many joyful or pleasant memories, as it does painful memories.

Sometimes prior to the window exercise I ask my students to talk about when/how they used their imaginations as very young children. "Making sand castles" and "dress up" or "playing school" are frequent answers. I also tell them that there was a time when stories were transmitted mostly by the printed and spoken word—books and radio respectively, before TV and movies. Sometimes I play old radio tapes of *Superman* or *Fiber McGee and Molly* to get the visualization/imagination wheels oiled (and to get a few laughs). And because so many wonderful works are now available on audio tape, it is easy to find something classic or contemporary to use in order to add even more oil. But don't let me digress too much here ... back to the specific exercise.

There are many reasons why I think the window exercise works (and by "works" I mean leads to meaningful writing for students). First of all, when I allow the students to write from a memory through images, craft does not become subverted by more deliberate thought, not on a conscious level anyway. Yet, the exercise provides a "structure" and a sequence that runs full

circle, that moves the work along and gives the writer a sense of progress.

Guided imagery also works because it allows students to explore concepts visually as well as through the other senses. In Pat Hoy's essay "Shaping Experience, Creating Essays," she says that the imaging experience helps the writer recall the moment and reconstruct it into an idea (89). I believe that reconstructing the moment not only helps us to make sense of that particular moment but also helps us place the moment into the whole that we call our lives to see cause and effects, patterns or themes that are hidden or emerging.

I also believe the window exercise tricks the writer into surprising herself and creates a sense of discovery. Donald Murray addresses the importance of adding an element of surprise into the writing experience in his text *Expecting The Unexpected* when he says, "Before they experience surprise, students find writing drudgery, something that has to be done after the thinking is over"(2).

Murray reminds us in this same text that writers are like all artists, rationalizers of accidents. "They find out what they are doing once they have done it" (3). Can you understand, then, why I like to think of my window exercise as a transparent canvas?

A word or two should be said about how I guide my students through this prompt, because I know that the way it is presented can effect its success. There are a few things I try to do before, during, or after the prompt that I will list:

1. Before we even begin, I spend a few minutes talking about the way I write poetry and that means talking about the sensory memories I have, how I remember seeing, hearing, tasting, etc., and how the sensory memory leads me into a "more specific" memory that might contain more settings, other people and a catharsis of some sort (or recognition of the importance of the memory).
2. During the exercise, I make an effort to allow everyone in the audience to work at her own speed. I ask the writers to put their pens or pencils down when they have finished each segment of the prompt so that I can look

around to see if some need more time. I do this so the more traditional taskmaster teacher in me is forced to slow down.

3. I also write while my students are writing. This also helps me pace the exercise and gives me a work-in-progress to share later in one of the small groups.
4. After writing, we share our rough poems in small groups. We don't critique or edit, we just share, celebrate, and enjoy.

I believe that reconstructing the moment not only helps us to make sense of that particular moment but also helps us place the moment into the whole that we call our lives . . .

Guided imagery can also be incorporated into a variety of instructional situations like building an experience base for inquiry or discussion, exploring or stretching concepts, or solving and clarifying problems. Yet there is something a little more magical about using guided imagery as a writing prompt, specifically a poetry prompt. Perhaps it is because writing, in general, is such a personal act and writing poetry is an accelerated form of consciousness within this highly personalized act. Poetry by nature lends itself to looking at concrete detail, while also making some reflective, thematic conclusion about the nature of things so that writing even the most basic poem, even in the rough draft stages, can be a cathartic experience.

To leap one step further, I venture to say that perhaps because the trend, at least in those civilizations that we think of as democratic, seems to be that we become more and more mechanized, more focused on satisfying our physical needs at the sake, sometimes, of our emotional needs, that we crave experiences that satisfy our emotional needs. Long ago, John Stuart Mills and hosts of others suggested that as we face new bodies of attitudes and values, and as we assess our expanding technological capacities that we must be mindful of nature and our basic human needs. I

believe that poetry returns us to some primal desire to focus on our needs and the needs of others.

Earlier I alluded to the fact that I believe there is a sociopolitical reason the exercise works. Timothy Fielding said something while he was talking about his newest novel *Headhunter* that struck a chord with me. "Something must be done about the need for light" he said which led me to think about the light or lack thereof in many of our students' lives. Many of our students live in a shadowy unknown. The news they get is dark. The political agenda suggests that we reconsider the extent of our humanity. The dark depths of our own pockets seems to be of greatest concern. Perhaps the window exercise allows for light, allows students to illuminate a part of their lives, a part they wish to recall or even reconfigure, a light in which they might bathe, or even a light they may share.

Poetry by nature lends itself to looking at concrete detail, while also making some reflective, thematic conclusion about the nature of things . . .

The best way I know to conclude any article intended for teachers is not just to tell what I know or what I know teachers know, but to share my students' interpretations of my vision. So I will close with a poem written (that resulted from the window exercise and edited several times) by one of my tenth grade students. And after having just read it over in order to place it herewith, I must say that perhaps I should not be so reluctant to admit to being a part of Brother (or Sister) Love's Traveling Salvation Show, especially in the face of our current political climate and in the face of the combined introspection and extension this type of guided writing exercise provides.

My Room

In my solitude,
I step to the window to see the
vast canvas of the world.

Miniature energized figures,
one after another
then a feather falling
into the leaves.

The leaves,
once chloro-filled
and refined,
are flaming red,
aureate yellow,
and muddy brown.

Beyond the boundaries
of my room,
I reach for one leaf,
savor its intricate veins.

Nelita Lewis

1994

Works Cited

- Findley, Timothy, reading from *Headhunter*, Appleby, Oakville, 12 May 1993.
- Hoy II, P.C. "Shaping Experience, Creating Es-says." In Kline, N. (Ed.) *How Writers Teach Writing*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992.
- Murray, Donald M. *Expecting The Unexpected: Teaching Myself And Others To Read and Write*. Portsmouth NH: Boynton/Cook, 1989.