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Audience is Everything

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Creative writing has four parts: the writer and the reader, the speaker and the listener. Students coming into a Creative Writing class know they are going to write something. The part a teacher opens up for them is their role as “listener.” From listening, they learn more about poetry—how repetition and word play build a poem, how rhythm works. From listening, they learn to pay attention to that other kid who they probably never thought about as more than wallpaper; they hear every member of the class present themselves through writing. To add to this, many teens never shut up. By calling silence and saying, “audience is everything,” teens begin to get it. No one is allowed to nudge or pass a note to another. No one turns the pages of a book. Everyone’s pencil is down. The speaker, in turn, never has to fight distractions. As time passes and listening becomes the norm, the speaker/author gains confidence that what s/he is presenting has value.

Start Easy

The teacher from the start offers situations which give a chance to read and a chance to listen. After writing in the computer lab, (example prompt: “Standing on a Corner with a Suitcase in my Hand”) there is a call to stop the printer (noisy critter), and students roll their chairs into a circle. The teacher passes out poems to the group; students will be reading another’s work. Perhaps six poems will be read. Some students will withdraw their poems from the reading. The readers have only a few minutes to ready themselves. Everyone knows these are first drafts. There is usually a lot of fun with these hot off the computer. In my boldest groups, students have stood up along the windowsill and proclaimed the poems. A quieter version is to only sit along the windowsill. In starter groups, sitting and reading from the circle is the best that they can do

The teacher starts by creating soft and disarming situations where students not only write but share their writing. A simple example is a rainy day. The teacher sends the students outside to find a puddle and to find their reflection in the puddles. Naturally the teacher follows them to take a picture—not of them—but of their reflections in the puddles (of course, using these later with their poems). The assignment is that they must stand and reflect over their puddle reflections for, at least, six minutes. They return inside and write for around 20 minutes, the poem title being, “Reflections.” As they finish, those who wish to share in the read-around circle do. In the beginning, perhaps only a quarter of the class is up for this last part. That’s fine.

The same can be done on a sunny day. Students are told to go outside and find a place separated from every other student and write for, at least, 20 minutes. Believe me, it takes 10 minutes to find the perfect spot. Naturally the teacher follows the group and re-enforces the rule that they may not talk to each other or sit together. At the end of 20 minutes, the group is brought together and sharing happens.

This can be done on an even more elaborate scale if time and money permits. I have had the privilege of piggy-backing my creative writers on an all day field trip with two science classes to Hoffmaster State Park and the sand dunes. Michigan’s boast to the world is our Great Lakes and sand dunes, yet some of our high school students have never seen them. Students are filled with awe after they have climbed the Hoffmaster dune stairway and turned the corner to see the lake. After the initial picture taking and viewing and pointing, I separate the group along the stairway, so that each is sitting alone. Again they are told, “no interacting.” The assignment is to write from the prompt, “Hello Silence, My Old Friend,” (Simon and Garfunkel) and again they are left alone for more than 20 minutes to write in their journals which they have brought with them. The group then reconvenes on the decking which overlooks the dunes and sharing happens. The bus ride, the walk into the woods, the nature center visit have by this time overcome inhibitions.

Students describe the writing and sharing in the dunes as “the bomb.” In the past, the read-a-around in this instance has been 100%.

Since I have done this more than once, I have had writers who come to the dunes to write and don’t want to stop at one poem. So eventually we get down to the beach and walk it back to the picnic ground. After beach walking, I have had students write from the prompt, “Time is an Ocean, But Even It Has a Shore,” (Dylan). This works too. Students will stare at that water and the waves and write.

Okay, a school has no budget for elaborate bonding moments. I have gained the same speed out of a simple field trip to a local park. Students can sit on fallen logs or picnic tables to write. Thoreau says, “Simplify, simplify.” Students get it—give them a pencil, paper and a chance to listen to their own inner voice.

For those stuck in the schoolroom, the teacher can also do original things which disarm and delight. Food poems can be more than a poem, they can be an experience. What I do is bring in an ironing board, an iron, sliced cheese, very cheap bread, marg and wax paper. We make grilled cheese sandwiches on the ironing board while the class is viewing the movie, “Benny and Joon,” a film that never gets old. The iron setting should be hot/dry, never steam. New wax paper is laid down for each sandwich to conform to OSHA standards (I’m joking). Usually I leave the board up for more than one day, and someone is always in the back making a sandwich. The food assignment is simple. Each student in the class writes down on a piece of paper the name of one food, even chewing gum is allowed. The words are put in a hat, and each student draws one slip of paper. One of my favorite student poems is still called, “Potatoes.”

As the term progresses, students have more than one piece of writing. At this point students are asked to choose three that they like the best to present to the group. Moveable desks can be arranged in a circle or the class can sit on the floor. The students at this point support each other. The reader reads three pieces. Listeners give supportive feedback: they identify what they like. They are

allowed to ask questions, to clarify. Often discussion happens and the writer just sits back and laughs as others get passionate about opinions.

That Emily Dickinson Thing, “I Like a Look of Agony”

In every class that I have ever taught, there has always been, at least, one Emily, male or female. Sharing their work is near terror. Most of the time, I have worked through this teaching conundrum by spending a long time setting up soft fall situations and also peer comfort zones where everyone roots for the guy on board. Early in the term I will start the day by reading two or three student poems without saying the names of the authors (I get permission from the authors before class begins). Shy students get their start by hearing words of praise from the class in general while still staying anonymous. However, there will always be one student who even deep into the term will not participate in a read-a-round. Some students will publish their work but not read aloud. Others will read aloud but never publish. Others will let some one else read their work for them. Even others will publish under a pen name. Some will substitute a famous author poem when it is their turn to read around (this happens often if a student just isn’t “on” that day, and they feel that what they wrote is really dumb stuff). The bottom line is the author has the final say. The teacher works around Emily, however contrary she may be. The worst case for me was when we were ready to publish our yearly poetry book, and our layout was done, and one author came and withdrew her poem from the book, stating that the poem “wasn’t really her.” I complied but was not happy. I had to substitute an art page in place of her poem. In the end, no one knew her poem was missing. Teenagers can be pretzels of difficulty.

Staging Events

Staging events is an easy way to break down barriers. If students are talking and listening to each other as the event unfolds, it becomes less difficult to share the writing outcomes—in fact, students are more often eager than shy. An easy event is to take

students to the local mall. I was lucky because my creative writing class followed lunch period. Thus, we were able to have the school bus deliver us at lunch, and we were able to stay through the class period. Teens and food courts go together. Teens are born to blow paper from straws and eat from food wrappers so their hands won't get stained. The assignment after was to spy on the mall. Students knew writing would follow, so they came with pencils for note taking.

Once back in the computer lab, I used a structured writing prompt borrowed from Michigan State University writing professor, Gloria Nixon-John. For teachers who have seen this first as the "Window Poem," it can be seen how I have just bent the form one more time. For those unfamiliar with the idea, I will lay it out here:

1. You are at the mall; describe your surroundings (teacher allows time here, takes attendance etc. The clicking computer keys reveal that ideas are going down)
2. A person approaches; describe that person—what is that person doing?
3. That person is carrying something; describe what is being carried
4. Another person approaches; describe that person too
5. The two people interact with the object carried; what is happening?
6. It's time for you to interact too; what are you going to do?
7. Give us an ending to all of this.

It should not surprise the teacher that some students will go off on their own tangents and do their own thing. So be it. Since my students had by this time been writing for me a long time, their mall stories were long and elaborate, each one worthy of publication. We published them all in our annual book which comes out in late May. The excerpt which follows comes from Aaron Vegh:

I am alone as I usually find myself at a mall. Across the sea of people crossing paths going this way and that is a girl. She is different from everyone else. Not because she wears all black to try to be

different like everyone who tries to be different. She is wearing a peach-colored dress that hugs her like a holiday reunion. This is not a skirt as is in fashion for the season in the windows of the Gap, but a modest dress which somehow shows more of her than any miniskirt would. She sports sandals with an open toe made from wicker and carelessness. Her destination is unclear but it lies on a line between her, myself, and somewhere behind me.

Aaron is a senior and helps set the standard for the class.

Enter the bongos

Most often there are students of music in a poetry class. These students come to poetry with their ears. The lines they write have a cadence. Their poems are made to be performed out loud. Each term, usually one student arrived with a guitar and sat in front of my desk and performed a poem they had just set to music. I was always delighted and always asked that they do it again before the class. Sometimes we simply started the class with their performance—we fit it in somewhere. More than once in my teaching career, students have brought in their violins, and we have listened to their sweet songs too. Oh yes, once there were bagpipes. That didn't work out so well.

A long time ago I bought a set of bongos (by the time I left teaching, I had purchased my third set of bongos). Over time, as I saw how successful drums were, I began to collect more drums. At my career's end, I had an Indian tom-tom, a Mediterranean drum, two Irish drums, an African drum, plus bongos. I also had Aboriginal rhythm sticks, plus various gourds, rattles and rain sticks. Beyond that I had little penny pipes—each pipe one key. I made it a point to bring out the music, at least, once every three weeks (I always checked with my buddy teacher on the other side of the wall).

It goes without saying that the first five to seven minutes of music are wild. I usually backed off and took attendance or pretended I was doing something important. Since these were high school kids, they did have reasonable self-control (not middle-schoolers). I noticed that what unfolded was that one or two musical leaders started to do

something within the group. Aaaaah, that is what I was looking for. The less musical would start to follow them. At this point, I started various counterpoints. One of the things I did was to leave the willing musicians to practice listening to each other, so they started and stopped together. I then pulled out small groups of readers (they felt awkward with the music)—three or four in a group and set them around the room to practice reading. I would hand out copies of poems by various authors like Maya Angelou, “Phenomenal Woman,” or Thomas Hardy, “Great Things.” The point was to use poems with a clear rhythm for students to follow. Teachers should give these mini groups time to practice reading in chorus too. The last twenty minutes, the whole group is brought together. The teacher stays fluid, because the students are really orchestrating this themselves. The poems are read to the music. It works out in different ways. Some students want soft beats behind the voices. Others want music only between stanzas. Others want crescendos of music, sometimes. What happens is only “sorta perfect,” but everyone has a good time, and everyone has had an exercise in listening: listening how repetition works, how rhythm works, how music and voices loud and soft make a difference in performance.

I have talked to many teachers who have after-school poetry clubs. We called ours a Coffee House. The advantage of being after-school is that our noise annoyed no one. I paired up with my counselor and we wrote a grant which awarded us enough funds to buy two sets of conga drums, plus a keyboard. The Coffee House ran several years, and we tried many different activities. One favorite was for students to sign up as readers. They read either their own work, or an author’s. Some students wanted to read music lyrics. That worked for us too: Metallica, Dead Presidents, the ever-faithful Anie DeFranco. At this point, we learned the beat poet one-hand clapping which is a click of fingers instead of applause. The proper exclamation to the one-hand clapping is, “You’re down, man, you’re really down.” Some of the audiences for the Coffee House were students who were losing attendance credit in

other classes and were offered this chance to do make-up time. Their home teacher had to agree to this. The rule for the Coffee House was audience is everything, and only good audience members were allowed in the room. In the beginning of the school year, I put that in writing and handed that out. Most of the time, the audience simply enjoyed being part of the activity.

Here is a pretty good example of a poem with a musical author who brought in his guitar:

Moonlight Hike

By Mike Frankhouse

My senses are keener, my body is cleaner at night

I am a nocturnal animal, a prowling mammal, at night.

No need for vanity or diligence for sanity 'cause you can't see me, at night.

You can come and see me anytime you'd like, at night.

No need for sunlight, I've got the warmth of the moonlight.

I'm a cold person, so the weather's just fine at night.

Sight is an exacto-knife, a desired cut in the sunlight.

All I need for sight are the rays of moonlight.

When the day gets its second wind, you'll hear, if you like—the night.

I can go on forever, my fingers hitting the computer keys like Ray Charles at his piano. However, I hope this gets most teachers from shy beginnings to a straight-out jam session. Writing about Creative Writing brings back some of my happiest moments in teaching. It’s hard to believe I did (and got away with) some of the things I did. The class was popular and usually over enrolled, thus bringing back on time from lunch some of the school’s most delinquent students. This tempered the principal’s fussing over details. Plus, there were no fights—so the principal could shut his door and relax, knowing the noise coming from the classroom was just business as usual.

This is still only half the story. At the end of each school year we presented ourselves in a book of our year's best work. This was publication. Our students also entered poetry contests and did poetry readings at the downtown art gallery if they were so moved to try real performance. Students have made CDs, tapes and videos of their work and turned them in for class projects. As our world becomes more media centered, so does our student population and they want to express their creativity in the new technology. I was always open to talent shows and whatever else they dreamed up.

And whatever else is done, a teacher should not forget to teach them Beat Generation one-hand clapping.

About the Author:

Joyce Benvenuto is a retired teacher who taught 16 years in an Alternative Education program. Benvenuto is a poet and has published her work in numerous small presses such as *Nimrod and Kansas Quarterly*. In her work for the National Society of Arts and Letters, she originated the Capital Area Poetry Contest for high school teens which is now in its seventh year. Teens are awarded money prizes; are published in a chapbook; and are recognized in the local paper. Benvenuto is a member of the National Writing Project at Michigan State University.