

Behind the Curtain: A Teacher's Quest to Better Understand, Write, and Model Poetry

When a teacher who fears writing poetry is forced to teach the skill, she discovers a new writing passion and a better way to reach her students.

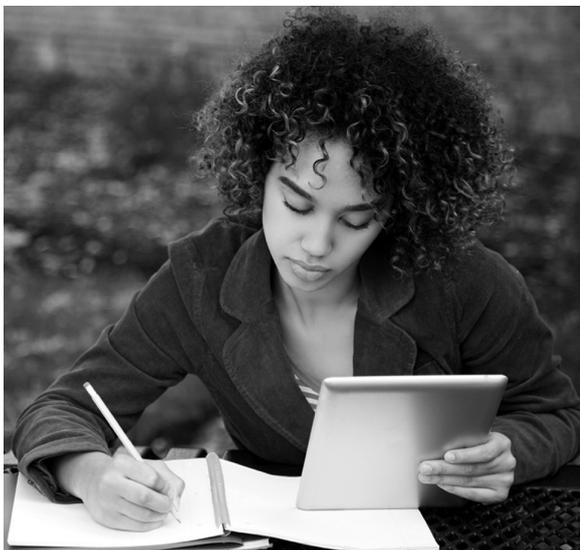
At first mention of the word *poetry* in my creative writing classes, I will often hear some soft moans (occasionally, even a voiced cry of “No! Not *poetry!*”), and I will smile because I remember feeling the same way. Early in my teaching career, for me the act of writing poetry was an enigmatic tangle of thinking, feeling, and confusion. Like a small, furry animal scurrying across a kitchen floor, it seemed harmless as long as I didn't go chasing after it. If I did, who knows what might happen? I might be bitten, I might contract rabies, I might be found out for the fake I was: an English teacher who was hopelessly helpless with poetry.

It wasn't until I was required to teach creative writing in the upcoming school year that I recognized an attitude adjustment was in order. For instance, according to Anthony J. Applegate and Mary Dekonty Applegate, teachers' attitudes toward reading clearly link to their success (or lack thereof) in teaching reading to their students (556). And despite a teacher's self-perceived theatrical talents, students can home in on any negativity the teacher may be displaying about a particular concept, skill, or subject, especially when those students are feeling uncertain (561). Teachers are often compared to performers, putting on a “show” for their students, but even in the world of drama, to be believable, an actor must *become* what he or she is portraying, even if it is only for that moment. My job as a creative writing teacher was to help students love poetry, and somehow, I had to love it too. I remember thinking, *but it's not like flipping*

a light switch—and that's when the metaphorical light did, indeed, go on.

Kelly Gallagher, author of *Write Like This: Teaching Real-World Writing through Modeling and Mentor Texts*, writes, “It is a scary moment to show your kids that you are not Superman or Wonder Woman. But this reluctance must be overcome. Students must see the process to understand the process. They must ‘stand’ next to you and see how you do it” (16). The combination of factors before me—a personal reluctance that would resemble that of some of my students and my interest in moving them away from that reluctance—placed me in the unique position not only to better empathize with those students' thinking but also to offer a sincere model of how to move past that reluctance. Teresa Cremin explored a similar theory in “Creativity, Uncertainty and Discomfort: Teachers as Writers” (415).

I began by reading *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach* (Behn and Twichell). In this book there are several useful exercises I still use with my students, but one in particular got my attention that summer: “Ten-Minute Spill” by Rita Dove (Behn and Twichell 13–14). In this exercise, the beginning poet has ten minutes to write a ten-line poem that transforms an adage or cliché phrase and uses five of eight word choices: *cliff, needle, voice, whir, blackberry, cloud, mother, and lick* (13). On a side note, it's possible that any eight words would work for this exercise, though like Dove's choices, it's important that they be concrete nouns and active verbs, some of which should have interchangeable parts of speech.



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In my first attempt with this free-association exercise—which involved the phrase “Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water” and the words *cliff*, *whir*, *cloud*, *voice*, and *mother*—I produced the following bit of verse:

Mother, don’t
throw the baby
off the cliff
but voice your
cloud with
a whir
and then
let the
bath water
do the rest.

Though I did not achieve poetic brilliance, completion of this exercise emphasized an important truth of poetry: rhyme, rhythm, long lines, and a somber tone are not required. My struggle with the time restriction drove me to this understanding—there were no spare

moments for counting syllables, locating a thesaurus, or developing a rhyme pattern. By the time I’d found

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the phrase and my five word choices, I only had five more minutes to compose. With one minute to spare and so little writing to work with, I had to make do with short line lengths, but I noticed these

quick line breaks—ones that I would have avoided under normal circumstances—could add power to some of my word choices. Limitations of time and content can shove writers into tight corners that require creative problem solving for escape, the perfect storm for unique poetry.

Dissatisfied with my end-product but intrigued by the process, I sought to find a way to help my students achieve a better result and, therefore, a more positive first experience with writing poetry. The exercise was originally developed for college writing students, so I developed a scaffold for the activity that would allow my high school students to have a bit more think time while also allowing for that creative struggle that comes from time restriction. Creating a step-by-step process seemed logical. My next attempt at this exercise, this time alongside my students, began with a three-minute freewrite in which my students and I brainstormed for phrases we might use in our poems.

At the end of the brainstorm session we took turns sharing our favorites. For my own writing, I chose the phrase “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” I then directed them to complete another three-minute freewrite, this time “playing” with their phrases and word choices. The “rules,” I said, were that the phrase had to be changed and that they had to use five of the eight word choices as part of that change. I shared my choices: *voice*, *blackberry*, *mother*, *cloud*, and *cliff*. During this freewrite I experienced affirmation of NCTE’s core belief that “The act of writing generates ideas” (“NCTE Beliefs”). It all seemed to come together much better this time, mostly because I wasn’t struggling with the writing prompt.

At the sound of the timer’s alarm, I jumped out of my chair and ran to the front of the classroom. My stunned students gaped at me. I said, “That was so fun! Let’s see what we’ve got. Quickly highlight your favorite phrases and word combinations.” After a brief moment of looking at one another in wonder, they busied themselves with the task at hand and I sat down to do the same. Then I said, “You have five minutes. Write the poem according to the instructions on the prompt.” I’m not going to lie: My body was buzzing with adrenaline. I was experiencing what Cremin identified as “real modeling,” which involves “spontaneity and

risk” (417). Being “real” with my students was both frightening and exciting. This is my result:

Voice is in the Blackberry of the beholder,
 But if it's your mother calling,
 Let her voice
 Float over
 Like an unreachable cloud
 Leaning toward
 You just above
 A tall, foreboding cliff.
 And don't think about it,
 Just answer the darn phone.

The poem is imperfect (I must admit an almost irresistible desire to tinker with line breaks and punctuation as I'm writing this), but it provides my students an illustration of how freewriting can make a big difference in a person's initial drafts. I showed them that freewriting improved my focus and gave me time to find purposeful line breaks and a humorous tone, including an “outside-the-box” use of the word *blackberry*.

After the exercise, I asked students to share their poems with their group members, and they were enthusiastic—everyone participated. Perhaps because I revealed my impromptu writing experiences, my students felt safe in disclosing their own. English teacher Chris Street said that when he wrote with his students, because he trusted them with his writing, they in turn trusted him, and as a result he developed a more “positive, caring relationship” with them (qtd. in Benko 297). In a survey I conducted with my creative writing students, 43 percent reported that by seeing me write alongside them in class, they could better “trust that I had their best interests at heart” (see Figure 1). The outcome is a classroom full of students whose faces are lit with excitement about their own writing.

Following this success, my next idea for a poetry writing exercise, like Dove's, involved limitations of time and content. Though it seemed incredibly clever at the time, I later learned it was not unique to my classroom; in fact, an eighth-grade English teacher in our school district told me she does a similar activity that she calls “Brain Dump.” In this activity, the writer is timed for five to ten minutes in recording his or her thoughts, stream-of-consciousness style. Writers who follow their brain leaps closely can find some excellent

poetic fodder. However, this is taxing work, so I recommend five minutes first, followed by another five minutes if students aren't happy with their results from the first five. Once time is up, students highlight their most interesting word and phrase choices and then arrange those words and phrases into potential pieces of a poem. Here is a passage from a stream-of-consciousness freewrite I composed during class, alongside my students:

I really don't know what I want to write, but I'll start now with the color of cheeks. They are *pale and they look like the moon*, or now I've been interrupted and it feels very frustrating I hear the *shuffling sounds of feet* and the *ticking* of my timer and I'm *lost in a reverie of nothingness* and everything is happening now I wonder what my students are writing and if their little hands are tired yet *they can't keep up with their thoughts there are no thoughts only words that begin out of nowhere and end in limitations they believe in words but the words have no meaning without the emotion they feel behind them and if they have no meaning then words are lies on page after page and become angry strides toward nothing* but nothing and what else is there to say but that the water in my what am I trying to say?

Sharing my freewriting samples with my students seemed to help them better understand the stream-of-consciousness concept: almost half of them reported that my models helped them better understand how to do their writing assignments (see Figure 1). I also believe it served as a sort of “permission” for them to write down the seemingly inane things that might pop into the human mind. If the teacher is willing to admit that she jumps from “I don't know what to write” to “the color of cheeks,” then they can write crazy stuff, too, right?

Once students selected their favorite words and phrases from their freewrites, I added one more limitation: they had only until the end of the hour to compose the initial draft of their poem. This restriction pushed them toward completion of the task without concern for perfection, which we all know can lead to a serious case of writer's block. Furthermore, I told them they would be expected to make big changes to their poems later in a revision, so perfection was not the goal. Here is what I wrote next to my students during the remainder of that same class period:

FIGURE 1. Student Survey

How does it affect you to see your teacher writing alongside you as you complete assignments? Check all that apply:

- It inspires me to write.
 - The models she provides help me to better understand how to do the assignment.
 - It helps me to trust that she has our best interests at heart.
 - I don't understand why she does it.
 - It doesn't affect me at all.
 - Other: _____
-
-

True

The fire that rages inside my head
Vibrates with an intensity
That pushes against walls
And begs for voice;
But when I reach for it,
It blows away like smoke
And leaves my words feeling like
Hollow strides toward nothingness.
If only the words could be
The fire and not just lies
That pretend to be fire.

Fickle fire, set me aflame
And lend me your compass
Of integrity. Take these lies
And render them to some
Kind of truth—even if it's not mine.

In my current teaching practices, I share this “Brain Dump” poem with students before we begin revision work and ask them to talk in groups about the specific word and phrase choices they most liked in my poem. Like me, many of my students have images and ideas related to fire and pain, and we often enjoy a laugh at the clear connection to the fiery, hand-cramping sensation a writer has when he or she writes quickly and for a long period of time. After they've talked, I have them share their ideas while I highlight the words and phrases on the interactive whiteboard. I then ask them to do the same exercise with their own poems. Next I tell them to look at the words and phrases that are left. Why weren't these highlighted? How can they be made stronger, better? I model this process by discussing some ideas I have for my poem.

Before they revise, they share their poems with one another and answer questions about their partner's work: What was the poem's main idea? What do you notice when you read the poem aloud? What questions do you have about the poem's meaning or intent? Armed with this feedback, students revise their poems to improve them in terms of clarity and effect. Here is my revision of the “Brain Dump” poem, based on feedback from my student partner:

The Flame

Truth rages and
Vibrates with an intensity
That pushes against walls
And begs for voice.

I listen.

Scratching out a flame,
I watch it dance in the wind.
It leans toward my words,
Then blows away like smoke.

I shiver.

Again I strike out,
And this time the fire
Burns brighter, stronger,
Reaching my fingers.

I suffer.

Touching the flame
Awakens my senses,
Wisdom sears
My heart's flesh.

I write.

When it's time to do revision work, I show them "True" and "The Flame" juxtaposed on the interactive whiteboard. I point out the favorite words and phrases that I kept, but I also explain that this poem better expresses what I meant by the original poem: now my reader understands that the poem is about writing, whereas before the intent of my poem was overly vague. Some students argue that they like the original poem better. I tell them that's fine, but as a writer, I like this one because it more clearly conveys what I mean. I have found that sharing this experience helps students understand the true definition of revision, that of "re-seeing" the work at hand. When they are finished, most students turn in poems that are deeply and carefully revised.

There are many ways to help students better appreciate the value of revision. An avid and active advocate of our local National Writing Project affiliate, Ozarks Writing Project, I am a big fan of "author's chair," a time in which a student reads one of his or her written pieces aloud to the class and the other class members provide feedback. This is yet another way to demystify the writing process for students. During the first round, I read one of my rough works in process as a way of giving students "permission" to share whatever they are working on, in whatever state that work is in. An ESL student of mine was encouraged by my example and said it helped her to "not be scared of" reading incomplete or rough versions of her writing to her fellow students. For her first author's chair, she read a portion of her journal for the class that explored the various societal demands placed on girls and the reasons for why these demands were patently unfair. In a later poetry assignment, I noticed those same sentiments echoed in her poem titled "Pink":

Pink.
 You seem so happy,
 but you are so sad.
 Why are you so sad,
 when you are so pretty?
 Pink.
 So sassy,
 so depressed,
 so insecure.
 Pink.
 Like cotton candy,
 so soft.

Like roses,
 so beautiful.
 Like my cheeks when I cry,
 so wet.
 Like the bows holding my hair,
 so strong.
 Pink.
 Sweet pink,
 but so sad, my life is pink.

She told me that the journal helped her reach the ideas for her poem, but that author's chair gave her the impetus for the final version we see here. "My other classmates would write happy and positive things," she said, "[but] my purpose of writing this poem was to make people understand that we are all sad inside. . . . We just need to stop listening to the monsters in our head and be ourselves. Show emotions. Support each other." Pushing my students to write honestly will help this young lady's dream for her fellow students come true.

Pushing myself to teach honestly, though, is the real starting point. By writing pieces in response to writing assignments I have crafted, I am able to remember how it feels to be on the other side of the desk. When I write on my own, before presenting an assignment to my students, I make myself aware of my thoughts, since the questions that come to my mind when I'm writing are bound to arise in some of students' minds as well. Based on this assumption, I have revised and reshaped many writing prompts and assignments to meet the learning needs I've discerned in this process. The metacognitive aspect of this work has also led to better enjoyment of poetic writing—an enjoyment that in turn positively affects students' mindsets.

Gregory W. Brooks conducted a study of teachers who participated in writers' workshops. In the end, "They experienced the struggles and joys of composing and revising, which, in turn, not only taught them to be more empathetic to the experiences of their students, but also 'humanized' them to their students" (178). It's not that students are overly impressed by a teacher who has decided to write with them. In my survey, 36 percent reported that either they didn't understand why I wrote alongside them or that it didn't affect them at all (see Figure 1). However, I'm convinced it matters because of the difference it makes to me and the way I outwardly express it to my students, who come to

suspect there must be something about this writing thing—otherwise their teacher wouldn't seem to love doing it so much (Brooks 189). A majority of my students responded positively to my writing involvement with the class, 43 percent reporting that “it inspires [them] to write” (see Figure 1).

Because I took a chance, took off my “Wonder Woman” mask, endured the frightening glare of the spotlight, and nakedly revealed myself as a thinker and a writer to my students, I am improving both as a poet and a teacher. Gallagher writes, “There is a real value when my students begin to understand that words do not just magically spill from my brain to the paper or screen. They need to see that writing is often difficult for me” (16). I would like to add that the difficulty is not only in the writing; it's in the teaching of writing as well. After Robin Williams's death, I found myself watching a famous scene in the film *Dead Poet's Society*. Williams's character, Mr. Keating, asks a reluctant student to describe his reaction to a portrait of Walt Whitman. Keating presses the student, asking question after question, allowing little time for the student to think. *He's using time restriction to force free-association*, I thought as I watched the segment. And I found myself wishing I had the charisma and the quick wit to achieve similar results. Mr. Keating is fiction, and I'm no Mr. Keating.

In his book, Gallagher includes a chapter titled “The Wizard of Oz Would Have Been a Lousy Writing Teacher” (223). Teachers can pretend to be Mr. Keating, can do the behind-the-scenes

preparation to fake our way to brilliance, but students will sense the falseness of this show. Instead, let's let students have a full look “behind the curtain” and “plant ourselves in the middle of our classroom and demonstrate how we approach this confusing thing we call the writing process” (225). I know it's a frightening proposition, but I can also tell you that if you want to show your students how to become better writers, honest and open writing failures are more valuable than any polished piece of perfection you can achieve behind the scenes. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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In “Found Poems/Parallel Poems” students compose found and parallel poems based on descriptive literary passages they have read. Students first select a passage and then pick out descriptive words, phrases, and lines. They then arrange and format the excerpts to compose their own poems. Students create found poems (poems composed from words and phrases found in another text) as well as parallel poems (original poems that use the same line structures as another poem, but focus on a completely different topic). This process of recasting the text they are reading in a different genre helps students become more insightful readers and develop creativity in thinking and writing. Since students are primarily identifying nouns and verbs for use in their poems, the lesson also provides a relevant opportunity for a grammar review of these two parts of speech. <http://bit.ly/1wzOAA0>