Teaching Mining; Mining Teaching

PEGGY RILEY

When writer-teacher Peggy Riley comes into possession of a packet of poems written by her great-grandfather, she is challenged with "doing something" with them. As a writing teacher, she is sure she can come up with a way to explore the poems—from both historical and literary perspectives—that will enhance her classroom work....

Last spring, my cousin came to visit, bearing a packet of poems written by his grandfather—my great-grandfather—Joseph D. Meagher, a coal miner who had lived and worked in Montana in the early 1900s. The poems, some typed, some handwritten in a flourishing script, and all except two carefully signed "by J. D. Meagher," cover an amazing range of ideas and experiences: working in the mines, farming, family reminiscences, a paean to a Monarch stove, dedications to local residents, thoughts on prohibition. The poems are not dated, but several clues point to the early part of the century as the time of their creation: the references to prohibition, the post-World War I surplus stationery on which some of the poems were printed, and, best of all, the poems themselves. J.D. begins one poem, "I was sixty-two last March, old friend, not a bad age for a man/Considering fifty-one of them were spent working in the mines." J.D. probably wrote most of the poems sometime between 1918 and the early 1920s.

J.D. Meagher, coal miner and poet

"You're the one to do something with these," my cousin told me.

I read the poems. Although unpolished, they intrigued me because they tell a story—an American story, a western story, and a personal story—of how an un-schooled miner found identity and possibly an understanding of his life through poetry, language, writing. The combination of my cousin's explicit faith in me and my great-grandfather's implicit faith in the power of language forced me to consider what the "something" was that I might do with the poems. Surely, I thought, as a writing teacher, I would be able to come up with some way in which the poems might enhance my classroom work.

My first ideas for them came out of my experience as a part-time history teacher. As a historian, I realized that by researching J.D.'s time and place and locating the poems in a social and historical context, I could use them to flesh out an understanding of the Montana years J.D. experienced. I'm working on this idea (which is another paper), but I wasn't satisfied with that as an answer, so I turned to what I know best. I'm first and foremost an English teacher and a writing teacher—a person who preaches mightily of the power of the written word—and I had received a gift illustrating...
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how writing and language can clarify a life. Certainly, I could find a way to use J.D.’s poems in my English classes.

At Las Positas Community College in Livermore, California, where I teach, the majority of students work—many of them full time—so I decided to share with them the poems J.D. wrote about his work as a miner. I was excited about the idea that J.D., a hard-working man, considered language and writing important enough to find the time and energy to write poetry. I hoped reading the poems would inspire the students to recognize how powerful writing can be outside as well as inside their academic lives.

To present the poetry to my students, I wrote a brief version of this piece to give the poems some context. In class, I spoke a bit about the poems and about J.D.’s story. I then elicited the students’ responses in reading logs, encouraging them to give free rein to their ideas. Perhaps they would want to say something about their own work? Perhaps something about workers they knew? Perhaps write a poem? Perhaps … what?

“Just go for it,” I told myself.

I also enlisted the support of my colleague, Elena Cole. Elena was teaching English 1A, a freshman composition class, and piloting a section focused specifically on workplace issues, targeted toward students in vocational or business majors. I thought J.D.’s work-based poems would complement the course readings, providing the students with a unique angle for writing and reflecting on work. Elena distributed my brief written introduction to her students and, as I had, asked for their responses in their reading logs. After the students read and responded to the poems, I visited her class and spoke to them about J.D.’s story as I had to my students. I wondered if these English 1A students’ responses would be appreciably different from the responses of my basic-skills students.

Miners Make the World Go Around

Of all the occupations in the multitude of crafts, the miners have it on them all without a bit of graft. They are loyal to their Union, and undivided stand; The concern of one is the concern of all within our land. I care not what your occupation, or how you earn your bread; Remove the coal we dig and your occupation’s dead.

This is a big assertion, but the truth of it we learn From the dreadful situation when we ask for what we earn. Snap judgment isn’t just or right on so big a thing to pass; Unless you know your subject, don’t make yourself an ass. Newspapers every day do this and individuals too, To get public opinion with the men who drafted you. Consider, please, the time we lose when coal is not consumed; Insurance for our lives is barred, too hazardous it’s presumed. And life’s great toll extracted from the men who dig the coal Now multiply each year, while compensation charity does. So size up the situation in any light you will, The operators have played hog and now would save the till. They have silenced the industries of dear old Uncle Sam; A Farvneu crowd they are and don’t give a D—.

reading the students’ logs, responding to their questions, and listening to their voices, I learned some valuable lessons both about students and about myself as a teacher.

I included three of J.D.’s mining poems and the opening lines from a fourth in the piece I wrote for the students. I began with an excerpt, which, together with the lines quoted above—“I was sixty-two last March, old friend, not a bad age for a man/Considering fifty-one of them were spent working in the mines”—establishes J.D.’s lifelong work as a miner. The excerpt explains how J.D. started out in his trade:

When I was a little boy, my Dad was killed
While working in the Arnot mines,
God willed;
On August 10, in ‘68, eleven I was then,
September first found me at work, my apprenticeship began.

Many students were startled at the idea of an eleven-year-old child going to work. “I couldn’t imagine what it would have been like back then when your father dies and you have to pick up where he left off. I couldn’t imagine an eleven-year-old who is too young and little to handle such a hazardous occupation,” wrote one of my basic-skills students.

Another agreed: “It really made me stop and think about how good I have it.”

One freshman composition student, however, was familiar with “how it is for the men to have to go to work at a very young age,” explaining, “My family are all ranchers and have been for over three generations, and even nowadays it’s very hard, very tiring work.”

Most students, though, couldn’t imagine the situation. “He started mining at eleven. Eleven—who would ever think an eleven
year old would be working to support his family? I guess most people take the lifestyle we have for granted,” one student wrote.

Another student added, “I’m wondering if J.D. did the regular kid stuff like play ball with friends, make tree forts, or just throw rocks in the nearby creek.”

After establishing that J.D. was a life-long miner, I included the poem he titled “Miners Make the World Go Around.” In this poem, J.D. exposes the mine operators as bosses who exploited the workers but didn’t hesitate to let them go when times were tough, no matter how industrious or loyal the worker.

J.D. wrote this poem soon after the end of World War I; the mines were closing down because the wartime demand for raw materials fell dramatically. I couldn’t expect my students to know the history of coal mining and union issues, but I thought they might respond by talking about the experiences they had had with bosses. They didn’t. Perhaps the topicality of the poem made it less accessible.

But two basic-skills students commented specifically on this poem. “I like the fact that J.D. accepts the fact that he is a coal miner and lives with [it], knowing that there are so many risks,” said one. And another observed, “One part ‘Insurance for our lives is barred, too hazardous it’s presumed.’ I thought that this part was interesting because it is saying that the workers are “barred” from death insurance because it is such a high-risk occupation.” Despite the great differences between J.D.’s life and their own lives, students could empathize with certain elements of J.D.’s experience.

If students were unfamiliar with the history and union issues in “Miners Make the World Go Around,” they nevertheless understood the risky nature of mining. In responding to J.D.’s elegiac poem, “In Memory of My Brother Jim,” students recognized both the miners’ dangerous work and the poignancy of a miner’s life and death.

One basic-skills student wrote, “My particular favorite was the poem about Joseph’s brother, who was a great man and who was another victim of the tragic trade of being a miner. In the days these poems were written, there was no workmen’s comp or job security,” reiterating the expectations many students have about their own working lives.

The sadness and resignation underlying the poem concerned not only working but also family, and students responded to this aspect of the poem, too. “I thought this poem was sort of touching how Meagher writes a whole poem about his brother,” said a basic-skills student.

Commented another, “J.D. talks about the kind of man his brother was. His brother was a good man, but died on the job as many men did while working in the mines. It’s kind of a sad story for these men who worked in the mines at an early age and continued to do so for the rest of their lives.”

And a third student wrote, “I thought it was rather sad when he wrote ‘When he gave a child to carry Uncle Sam’s guns’ because it seems as though he is basically raising his children to have them taken away by war.” None of the students, however, mentioned workers from their own families as I had anticipated.

J.D.’s poem, “To the Man Who Can Whistle and Sing,” was the favorite of many.

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**In Memory of My Brother Jim**

He coaled a train at Pittsburg  
And to New York made the run,  
Then he coaled a fleet that carried our flag  
That went to the rising sun.  
And it warmed his heart,  
For he played his part  
As a good American son.  
He raised a family—half a score  
Of daughters and of sons,  
And again he smiled  
When he gave a child  
To carry Uncle Sam’s guns.  
But the story is old,  
When all is told, he died as he had lived,  
And when too late he knew his fate,  
A victim of the mining trade.  
For forty years he swung the pick,  
His State he sure niched,  
And out of his toil  
They gathered the spoil  
The pound of flesh they pitch.  
With many a fight to increase his might  
And tow’ring from the power that be  
A little more toll for digging coal  
And he died when it was in sight.  
With a rake and a spade a garden he made,  
Where nothing but weeds would grow,  
And without despair he gave it care  
To garner the good that came.  
For as a miner he knew what he’d have to do  
To hoard for the days it rained.  
And he made the race with sacrifice  
From murmuring he refrained;  
And so one day he laid away  
The pick, the shovel and drill;  
He waited the merciful call of God  
And now lies on Johnston hill.
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students, both basic-skills and freshman composition. This poem reveals the importance J.D. places on work as a part of a man's character along with the qualities he attributes to a good partner. He praises the hardworking, cheerful miner and condemns those who don't contribute the same wholehearted effort.

In responding to this poem, students came closest to talking about their own work experiences. These responses were also the longest, suggesting that this poem really hit a chord in the students' working lives. Said a freshman composition student:

My favorite is the poem about the whistling miner. I can relate to his point of view. Work, the gloomy kind, can go by at least a little better if you were cheerful about something. You don't have to enjoy your work, but you don't have to be a thorn in someone's foot about it. Just do the best you can and be content to have what you do.

And another wrote:

I really enjoyed the poem "To the Man Who Can Whistle and Sing." I guess I like it because I can relate to it. I always enjoy someone working without complaining and if he does it with joy it's a tremendous plus. I notice that the day seems to breeze by in a much better atmosphere. I always wonder what makes the guy so cheery, how they find joy in the mundane, maybe he has found his love. Either way those kind are a pleasure to work with.

A basic-skills student made the same point from another angle:

I like J.D.'s point about how he liked to work with cheerful people and hardworking people and how that made working more enjoyable. I agree with this point a whole lot because who really wants to work with people they do not enjoy being around that would just make work really crappy.

Two freshman composition students found some insight into J.D.'s character in the poem. One wrote, "You can tell that J.D. Meagher was a proud miner and enjoyed his work. He only wanted to be around others who enjoyed their work, too."

Commented the other:

I admire the author for his outlook on mining and life in general. I especially like the poem in which he tells about working with different kinds of men, and his preference of a man that sings and whistles. I wonder if he was one of these men, because it seems that he approached mining as much more than just a job.

And one basic-skills student found J.D.'s poem an inspiration:

I wonder if he is able to always keep his head up and be joyful at work. If so, that's a great quality. I am not the type of person who is always happy on the job. But I would love to be. I think this poem really challenged me to cheer up, because it is contagious.

Many students responded to the collection rather than to the individual poems. As one freshman composition student wrote, "It is absolutely extraordinary to be able to take a look into the life of someone from a different time period. His poems really gave a good sense of feel for the conditions and emotions of the time."

Another was full of admiration for a man who "educated himself to be able to express himself in his various poems." The student continued, "I also write poetry and find them to be an excellent source of self-expression. But given the educators, books, and assistance that I have been given, to enable me to write poems, I have had it extremely easy compared to him."

Another student agreed, "J.D.'s writing shows that even though life may be tough, you have to remember the good points."

After reading the poems, one basic-skills student said she "realized how poetry could help a person through hard times."
Another student wondered “why he chose to write poems instead of stories or something else.” An international student in Elena’s freshman composition class found an answer to that question. After admitting that she found poems difficult to read, even in her native Japanese, she wrote, “I think he had many thoughts and had to express them in some way, which was poem for him. Very amazing story. I wonder if my great grandfather wrote a poem or not . . .”

I began this project with a vague notion that students would use the poems as models through which they might examine their own work experiences. I also wondered how the responses of my basic-skills students might differ from those of Elena’s freshman composition students who were studying, reading, and writing about workplace issues, but there was no appreciable difference. In regard to focusing on the poems as models, I realized I was expecting students to take an abstract leap to consider their present or anticipated working lives through what probably appeared to them yet another academic exercise (the reading logs). Instead, they responded to J.D.’s very human story: a man, his work, his family. They compared J.D.’s life to their own and, in many cases, came to appreciate much of what they had taken for granted: school, employment benefits, whistling co-workers, throwing rocks in a nearby creek. It goes to show that students learn because of our intentions and our passions—and in spite of our assumptions.

As well, the project reminded me of the power of “real” writing. When Elena Cole surveyed her students at the end of the semester, asking which readings they most enjoyed, two of the students chose the poems, even though they were not on the reading list. Students in both classes were fascinated that the poems were from my family; they liked knowing this personal aspect of my life. Many wanted to know more about my research and the writing I am doing. Real writing from real people, like my writing and my great-grandfather’s writing, makes reading and writing relevant.

In sharing my great-grandfather’s poems with students, I’ve come to treasure them even more than I had before. It has been a very personal experience, one that reaches beyond the textbook and into the life of a man who believed in the power of language and writing.

**Afterword**

Joseph D. Meagher left Montana in the early 1920s, forced out by drought, by unemployment when the mines closed down, and by poor health. With his wife and two youngest daughters, J.D. moved to Los Angeles. He died in 1928 of bronchial pneumonia, a “victim of the mining trade” like his brother Jim.

And about the poems themselves? I don’t know if J.D. shared the poems with others—family or friends—or whether he wrote them simply for his own expression. My cousin found the poems in his mother’s effects after she died; his mother was J.D.’s youngest daughter. Who knows how long the poems had languished unread. Sharing the poems with my students, writing about them, wondering about them, and listening to them has returned the poems and J.D.’s voice to life.

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