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In Praise of Poetry: Using Poems to Promote Joy, Community, and Social Emotional Learning During the Pandemic

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As we

embrace resist

the future the present the past

we work we struggle we begin we fail

to understand to find to unbraid to accept to question

the grief the grief the grief the grief

we shift we wield we bury

into light as ash

across our faces

– Layli Long Soldier, “Obligations 2,” *New Poets of Native Nations*

This year has been a wobbling pendulum, an ear-shattering tidal wave, a screeching pair of tires at a crosswalk. As educators, we have had to, in the words of Layli Long Soldier, “shift” our understandings, “wield” new tools, and even “bury” old ways of thinking. These abrupt changes have led to grief and anxiety: How do we survive teaching through the COVID-19 pandemic, as no other teachers have done before? How do we build connections across the dark void of black squares that have replaced our brightly posterred, physical classrooms? There is no blueprint, no map

for this year, and that has largely been the problem.

But there is one thing we do know: taking care of our students has never been more important. The lack of social and emotional connection young people have been subject to this year is one of the most concerning consequences of this pandemic. As educators, we have been encouraged to “embrace” (Long Soldier 2) the responsibility of managing this chaos while grappling with how to create meaningful and joyful learning experiences within the confines of hybrid learning.

As a teacher with eight years of experience and a first-year teacher working together for the first time, we find ourselves feeling lost and unsure of how to proceed. In addition to separately teaching sections of freshman and junior English, we co-teach a section of freshman English at a high school in northern NJ. For the majority of the year, our district has enacted a hybrid model with two rotating cohorts of students who attend school in-person and a single cohort of completely virtual students who attend class via Zoom.

We hope to share with you how we have attempted to bridge the gap between our “past” and “present” (Long Soldier 3) ways of teaching through the pathways of poetry. Implementing the reading and writing of poetry on a weekly basis has played an important role in the way we navigate both online and in-person modes of learning simultaneously, prioritize student engagement and choice, foster Social Emotional Learning (SEL), and honor the purpose of writing for enjoyment. We will describe our rationale for poetry, an overview of our approach, and finally, specific mentor texts and methods.

Why Poetry?

So often, poetry is deemed as archaic and inaccessible. Students often come to us with these ideas based on their limited exposure to different types of poetry. We believe the work of contemporary poets helps students break down these misconceptions. Inspired by the #TeachLivingPoets initiative, we find sharing contemporary poems helps students feel more connected to the language and subject matter, allowing them to see that poetry is neither old nor dusty, but rather that it is important and thriving.

Poetry can often be economized in terms of form. A short poem is more digestible to a student’s eye but can offer much in the

way of meaning and writer’s craft. As we will show you, the form allows students to discover and take ownership of their voice by initially mimicking the poet, developing mastery of the professional’s craft moves, and then, ultimately, inserting their own moves as they go. The universal literary themes of poetry also cater to empathy-based discussions and critical reading skills.

But most importantly, our poetry workshop supports Social Emotional Learning. We hope you notice with these mentor texts and approaches that while we are using them to teach specific skills (diction, pacing, descriptive and figurative language, structure, repetition), this work also strives to create a space where students can critically reflect and express themselves. With these poems, we ask them to consider who they are, what brings them joy, and who/what is important to them. While the hybrid environment has made us feel more disconnected to our students than ever before, poetry has served as a pathway to our students’ wellness and emotional needs. Especially this year, our students’ wellness must be a priority, and poetry can be a part of that care.

Our Approach to Poetry

Our approach to teaching poetry is informed by a reading-writing workshop model where we use poems as mentor texts for practicing close-reading and craft moves. Typically, we incorporate one poetry exercise in addition to our required curriculum every week. We begin the lesson by reading the poem with students from a Google Doc that everyone has edit access to. After reading it aloud once, we read it again and ask students to use the comment feature to note favorite lines, questions, interpretations, and personal and real-world connections. We encourage them to use the reply feature to respond to a peer’s comment—we love watching students

celebrate their peers. With some students learning remotely, working together on a shared Google Doc allows us to collaborate in real-time.

We discuss our thinking as a class, and then take a moment to notice any specific patterns that the poet has established. If there is a specific craft move we want to teach, we will highlight it. Then, we as the teachers model the task ahead: following the form and style of the poet to insert our own voice and create our own version of the poem. We model our drafting process in the same Google Doc above the poem, thinking aloud as we write. Then our favorite part: we invite students to draft. In a new Google Doc shared with us, students craft their own version of the poem. As they write, we hop between their documents to provide feedback using the same comment feature. Sometimes, because there are two teachers, one of us will continue to draft in the Google Doc to continue modeling process.

With this approach, we have also found that time for writing can happen away from the screen. At times, we purposefully instruct students to draft on paper in another room, by a window or outdoors so they are able to give their eyes a break from the screen and connect with their surroundings. For our students who are in-person, we have them close their computer and draft at their desk, in the hallway or by a classroom window while maintaining social distance. This is also a way for students to engage with writing on paper, rather than solely in a digital format. Now more than ever, we need to find opportunities for technology breaks.

Mentor Texts and Methods

A barrier to using mentor texts in the classroom can sometimes be sorting through seemingly endless options available or not even knowing where to look. We've found success with the following mentor texts.

The “My Life in 30 Words” poem asks students to craft a personal piece about what their life currently looks like, providing a reflective space for us to share in the strangeness of this year but also honor what remains normal or celebratory. There is one rule: the poem must be exactly thirty words—no more, no less. The strict word count enforces a structure and asks students to be mindful of their diction and pacing, but it also gives them the freedom to make a list or describe a moment in time.

January No Cases Calm
February Cases in China life is fine
March School gets shut down
April the worst month ever
May All virtual quarantine
June School is unfortunately over

Poem by Gavin Smith

2020 has been bad.
Protesters are getting mad.
Murder Hornets, Flying spiders,
I'm getting tired.
When will it end?
Got school to attend,
And rules to bend.
COVID RUINED EVERYTHING!

Poem by Zachary Falkenstern

Poems About Identity

This next method is inspired by Linda Christensen's “Name Poem,” featured in Chapter 1 of her book, *Reading, Writing and Rising Up*. This piece asks students to write about their name: its origins, meanings, connections to stories or personal experiences. As Christensen writes, “Students’ names provide the first moment when a teacher can demonstrate their warmth and humanity, their commitment to

seeing and welcoming students' languages and cultures into the classroom." This is a great exercise for community building at the beginning of the year as students introduce themselves and get to know one another. We love to share with students the vignette "My Name" from Sandra Cisneros' book, *The House on Mango Street*. This mentor text

invites us to discuss the meaningful ways in which names are linked to families, cultures, personal experiences, and senses of self.

In this poem, student Katie Bang navigates her two names—"Eubin," her Korean name, and "Katie," her American name.

Katie and Eubin.

People nod and smile at Katie.
People tilt their heads and frown at Eubin.

People don't pause for Katie to repeat herself.
People pause and ask "Spell that out for me?" to Eubin.

People call on Katie without hesitation.
People pause and cough awkwardly at Eubin.

People make Katie feel welcomed even when they don't know who she is.
People make Eubin feel judged even when they don't know who they are.

But somewhere, People know the correct way to call on Eubin.
And there, People try to call on Katie without stuttering and mispronouncing anything.

People immediately type Eubin's name into their computers.
People have to ask Katie to write down her name for them.

People nod and smile at Eubin
People tilt their heads and stare at Katie.

Eubin and Katie.

Poem by Katie Bang

To explore how our emotions and identities are tied to people or places, we read a seven-line, untitled poem by Nikki Grimes, who packs a punch with two succinct similes and a culminating metaphor about Oklahoma out of a "need to get [her] feelings out"

(Grimes). This poem provides students with an approachable template to practice crafting figurative language. Though simple in structure, this poem allows students to share about the people and places that are important to them.

I think of my dad
and my heart fills
Like a cup of joy,
my eyes fill
Like a body of water,
and I am lost in a happiness
Of my tears.

Poem by Marissa Williams

I think of Florida
and my heart brightens
Like Fort Myers,
my eyes tear
Like the hurricanes,
and I am lost in a heatwave
of those sunny beach days.

Poem by Aidan Slee

To round out our identity poems, we invited students to write a piece after the original “Random Autobiography” poem by Mary Ann Larson. As its title suggests, the poem invites us to consider life events that viewed in isolation might seem insignificant, but

when strung together at “[r]andom,” create a snapshot of who we are. Students borrowed sentence starters from Larson (“I have...,” “I am...,” “I saw...”) and played with structure and repetition.

I have never been out of the country, yet the beauty lies within the borders.
I have been to Hawaii and seen fire shows and hula dancers.
I saw sharks and dolphins swimming under me.

I have seen many different exotic cars.
I want them all, I need them all.
I have a dream of a huge garage,
Filled from wall to wall.

I have lost keys, wallets, everything I own,
I usually find them but not without a scare.
I am still looking for some of my things

I’ve learned many life lessons.
I’ve learned responsibility trumps excuses every time.
I’ve learned my worth as a person is measured by my worthiness as a friend.
I’ve learned change, which is not often easy and not often kind, is always good.

Poem by Tyler Bajakian

Poems for Finding Joy

As the pores of our news feeds are often clogged by negativity, we strive to share poems with students that promote positivity and celebrate what we love. With JP

Howard’s “praise poets and their pens,” we encourage students to mimic her repetition of the word “praise” and insert what they wish to celebrate, honing in on perhaps the smallest of details.

praise my family who supports me
how they make me laugh when I need to,
Then hug me until I stop crying.
praise how they have
made me feel accomplished for the smallest thing,
and scent of homemade meals,
praise what we have been through to get here,
Gently let me down without hurting,
We have been resilient
praise our difficulties and our sadness,
let our time heal
at home, at work, in cafés, even in school
praise how we hold our memories up to light,
gentle and cupped in palm of hands
sometimes that's all we need
praise movies and music
how my face lights up when I am in your presence
praise power of love and happiness
who played a important role in my self discovery ,
crying behind a closed door.
praise how I enjoyed my week,
while I stressed about school and chores when I don't need to,
because everyone needs to heal, especially because we need to.

Poem by Maria Silva

Continuing with the theme of joy, we discussed with students the idea of poems as gifts. Using words like gift wrap, we can craft poems to appreciate the important people in our lives. Our mentor text, Aracelis Girmay's "You Are Who I Love," encourages students to zoom in and use precise, descriptive language to craft strong

imagery as Girmay does ("You, selling roses out of a silver grocery cart"). This piece allowed students to build something they could give to others while also honoring the most important people in their life. During the holiday season, students gave these poems as gifts to their loved ones.

You, twirling your hair on your finger
You, laughing and singing to the spanish music on the radio
You, in the kitchen cooking chicken with all the spices on the counter
You, loving your incredibly confusing job
You, watching your favorite show "F.R.I.E.N.D.S" on the DVR
All the DVD's on the stand that holds the tv
You, being the independent and hard working woman I long to be when im older
You, with your amazing smelling perfume that sticks to all your clothes

Walking into the house and immediately smelling the scent of you and all the memories we have made together in this house
You, straightening your hair in the morning every day and letting the burnt smell linger in the air
You, loving me no matter what and not being afraid to talk to me if I need anything
You, yelling and making sure that I wake up in the morning to get to my classes in time
You, working you butt off just to make sure we have everything we need to live
You, you mama are amazing and you are the one I love

Poem by Imari Tirado

Who are you?
Are you who I love?
Are you who I'm supposed to love?
As days get worse
You start shining brighter
Some days you are the reason why the day gets darker
Are you who I'm supposed to love?
You, working so hard, never giving up
You, caring for family
You, throwing away your life for your family
You, are someone I admire.
You, make struggles struggle, always helping, trying to find a solution.
You, are someone I question my love for.
Who are you?
You, are someone I'm not close with, even though you are the closest.
You, are someone who always helps me in times of need, but I still struggle to help you.
You, telling me to clean my room
You, who scolds me on the littlest things
You, who tells me to be more active
You, are only trying to help me take care of myself.
Who are you?
I want to know you better, always close yet so far.
You, are someone who makes me feel safe yet so dangerous.
You, are someone I want to get closer with.
You, are who I aspire to be.
You, are someone I am grateful for and appreciate.
You, are someone I love.
You are who I love.

Poem by Andrew Kim

Closing Thoughts

With this approach, we have noticed the profound impact of using poetry to create a communal space across a virtual platform. In-person conversations with hybrid students open naturally between the bell and logging into Zoom; and most significantly, connections are being forged between students in each square on the screen. Our virtual students who we have never seen in person this year have become three dimensional. While our students' poetry has shown that they long for a day when we can learn altogether in person, it is also clear that we can create some semblance of community and belonging in the meantime.

Our work this year has only further solidified our belief that poetry reveals our vulnerabilities. When "we wield" our words through poems, we can turn our vulnerabilities "into light," bravely sharing our work and building empathy as we listen to others. We write alongside our students to model our own vulnerabilities and to let them know we too feel vulnerable in the face of uncertainty.

We must carry on poetry well after the pandemic has passed. It deserves to be inhaled and exhaled weekly over the course of the school year as a way to build community and offer safe and creative spaces for student expression, and for this to be made possible, it must occupy a permanent place in ELA curricula—not just during poetry month, not just to demonstrate skills, not just as a stand-alone unit.

But we want to note here that while poetry has been *our* approach, our "light" (Long Soldier), we acknowledge that there are other pathways to navigating this year we have yet to discover. In a way, as poetry has allowed us to carve a new path, it has also encouraged us to question and redefine our values of what is most important to us as educators. How is our purpose being redefined by this pandemic and how do we

allow this time to redefine us in meaningful ways? For us, for now, it's embracing one poem at a time.

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