

# Making a Pitch for Poetry in ABE

One of my favorite books about teaching reading and writing, *Schools of Thought*, includes the following statement:

*Literacy's most profound function is to help connect the individual with larger and larger circles of reference, which ultimately come to constitute the meaning of his or her life.... Having a very limited, secular, utilitarian view of literacy—as a means to employment, for instance—we have invented a kind of teaching that cuts literacy off at the roots, diminishing both its appeal and its capacity to empower. (Brown, p.90)*

When I first read this, I was an education professor, training students to become high school teachers. The book was part of one of my courses, and we discussed this quote at great length. We talked about the pressures on schools to teach “marketable” skills, and the ways that legislative demand for quantifiable assessment of students’ learning made it difficult to teach some of the things we thought were important. I recently reread the book from my current perspective as an adult educator and consultant. What struck me most forcefully was the increased challenge of looking at literacy in this way while

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working with adults, and the simultaneously increased need to do so. Too often in the adult education classroom, although teachers may have a broad-based, holistic image of what literacy is, we tend to teach only the most basic and functional skills and uses of reading and writing. Our students often struggle with a wide variety of challenges, inside and outside the classroom, and our impulse is to help them move along, master the requisite skills, earn the credential. But however well-intentioned our actions, when we teach the skills of literacy as if the ability to read a newspaper or fill out a job application is the goal of study, we deprive students of the opportunity to see reading and writing as ends in themselves. We cut them off from what has been most powerful, sustaining, and beautiful in our literary tradition, and we miss a very real chance to help students connect with other places, times and cultures in ways that will have value to them both in the classroom and in their private lives. My own struggle to incorporate literature into the classroom has been a lengthy one, and not without failures along the way. But I hope the story of that struggle will help other teachers who are trying, as I am, to balance students' immediate, pressing needs with the desire to open up to students the power that we find in literature of all kinds.

In *Writing a Woman's Life*, Carolyn Heilbrun's best-selling study of women's biographies and autobiographies, she writes:

*What matters most is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that. And it is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. (p.37)*

This idea that we need to know stories in order to make sense of our own lives has been the organizing principle I've used to select, organize, and teach literature in my Basics II classroom. In order to help my students connect with others, to see themselves as part of larger and larger communities, I have thought about story. What stories do we tell each other? Who gets to hear which story, and which version of any given story do we share? How do we see our lives, and how do we want others to see us? I admit freely that it took time, and a singular experience with a student to be able to put these ideas into words, but the impact of the changes I've made has been profound and lasting, for me as a teacher, and for my students.

***[Students] are beginning to see themselves as readers and thinkers in ways that I do not think they would if we were working with safer, easier material.***

My curricular epiphany was the gift of a student. He had been placed in our program's beginning literacy course, but that teacher quickly came to the conclusion that Sterling (the student) had been misassigned, and asked me if I would take him. On the night that Sterling first entered my class, the writing assignment was "Why have you come back to school?" The rest of the class had already begun writing, and I expected from Sterling what I expected from the others—approximately one paragraph of hard-won, laboriously written prose. But after the others had finished, Sterling continued to write. He finished just as we took our break and handed his paper to me before going outside for a cigarette. I glanced at it briefly, then rushed to the copier to make duplicates for the other teachers in the program. Sterling had written a kind of prose poem—a spare, eloquent and moving piece about the challenges he had faced and the ways that he had tried to overcome them.

After the break, I sat down to talk with Sterling, and told him how good I thought his paper was. He stared at me for a moment, looked around, and said, "Are you talking to me?" He seemed unable to believe that I could think so highly of his work, even after I told him (quite truthfully) that his was one of the best pieces of writing I had ever received as a teacher, at any level. And although Sterling stayed in my class for about two months after that, until he took and passed the GED exam, I don't think I was able to make him see the quality of his writing in the same way that I did.

In retrospect, the reasons for Sterling's shock at my response to his writing seem more obvious and understandable. He had spent very little of the last twenty-five years of his life reading stories of any kind; he heard stories from day to day, but he was not in the habit of reflecting on the quality of the stories he heard, nor was he thinking about the difficulty so many people experience when they try to commit a story they've told to paper. The differences between a good story told orally and a good story told on paper may be subtle, but they are critical to making the story real for a reader. Working with Sterling made me want to give my students a broader and deeper experience of story, but I was unsure about how to proceed. I wanted material that would interest and excite my students, that would be challenging but not impossibly difficult. I wanted to include works by writers of different cultures and time periods, and I wanted the real thing, not the retelling of a classic story in watered-down language that would communicate the plot, but elimi-

nate the power and subtlety of the original. Given that my students are adults with reading skills that range from about a third- to a sixth-grade level, this would seem to be no easy task.

My search is not over, and there are days when I pore over book after book in despair, wondering how much farther I will have to go to augment my growing collection of materials, but I have found a tool that serves my purpose—poetry. I am still shocked, writing this, to find myself a champion of poetry in the classroom. In the past, I tried to avoid teaching poetry if I could, knowing that many students have been trained through less-than-ideal experiences to see it as irrelevant, boring, and a waste of time. There have been many days when I've begun class not knowing whether the material I've selected for us will be warmly accepted or thinly tolerated.

Although we don't always like to admit it, much of education, at every level, is a search for "right answers." We teach many subjects as if they were puzzles to be solved, or rules to be mastered. This might work well in some, limited areas of some subjects, but it's a deadly, deadening way to teach people how to read and write. Students who spend most of their time mastering rules, filling in the blanks, and completing multiple-choice-laden worksheets may become passive consumers of the printed word as it is set before them, but they are no nearer to becoming readers and writers in any meaningful sense than they were before they stepped inside the classroom. Poetry cannot be taught well in those formats, and that may be why it's taught so little and so poorly in

many schools today. But if the goal is to help students read and think about stories and language, sample a variety of writers, and see connections between the concerns of writers and their own, daily concerns, then poetry is an excellent medium.

Poetry has a great deal to offer my students. It is, first of all, a compact form, which allows us to read whole poems in one class, generally more than one. This brevity also allows me to select material with slightly more complex and challenging language. Because there are fewer words than there would be in a longer prose work, I have the time to define all the words that are unfamiliar to my students. The language of poetry tends to be concrete and specific, which helps readers to develop pictures in their minds of the scenes that the poet creates. I am far more comfortable using poetry from a variety of time periods and traditions than I would be in attempting to do the same with prose works, for many of the reasons above. As a result, my students encounter a far broader range of voices and traditions. They also have a chance to see how writers in different times and cultures have addressed similar themes.

Recently, as part of Boston Public Library's celebration of National Poetry Month, I took my students to a lecture by Molly Peacock, past president of the Poetry Society of America, entitled, "How to Read a Poem." I had gotten copies of the poems she would be discussing prior to the lecture, so that my students and I could read through them in class. Peacock had chosen "Let Evening Come," by Jane Kenyon; "No Worst, There is None," by



Gerard Manley Hopkins; and “Wulf and Eadwacer,” by an anonymous tenth-century English woman. These are not typical choices for an adult literacy class, and not necessarily poems I would have chosen on my own. But my students were able to read and understand them with far less difficulty than I might have anticipated. We talked about the similarities and differences in language, subject, and style, and the different worlds the poets lived in. When we attended the lecture, I was pleased not only by the number of students who attended, but by the way Peacock’s readings of the poems built on our own. I have often told students that there can be more than one “correct” interpretation of a poem, but listening to the audience as they presented different ideas and seeing Molly Peacock respond to each interpretation as a real possibility was a tremendous reinforcement.

Since I began significantly increasing the amount of time devoted to poetry in my class, I have seen a number of positive changes in my students. One of my informal criteria for selecting poems is that they be strongly rhythmic; they needn’t rhyme, but the structure of the poem should help the reader to figure out how to pronounce unfamiliar words, and which words to stress. The impact has been a greater willingness to read out loud on the part of all students and a reduction in the number of mispronunciations. Students demonstrate greater confidence in their reading skills, which carries over to other kinds of text; one student, who previously preferred not to read, now not only reads, but helps others sound out words. When we read “Children’s Story” by Ricky Walters, a poem that tells the story of a young man seduced into a life of crime, chased by police, and shot, we had a long discussion about the possible meanings of the title that helped us think about the interrelationships between irony, sarcasm, and tragedy, though we did not label it as such. Abelardo Delgado’s poem “Stupid America” gave us a chance to talk about racism and ethnic identity in American society. We read “Casey at the Bat” to mark the opening of the baseball season, and talked about comedy in poetry. One student had seen the Disney cartoon based on the poem, and told the rest of us about the differences between the original and the Disney version, leading us to think about other things that have been “Disnefied.”

In her book *Writing Down the Bones*, Natalie Goldberg laments that:

*Poems are taught as though the poet has put a secret key in his words and it is the reader’s job to find it. Poems are not mystery novels. Instead we should go closer and closer to the work.... Stay close to them. That’s how you’ll learn how to write. Stay with the original work. (p.31)*

Most teachers were themselves taught according to

the “secret key” method, and overcoming that training can challenge even the most well-intentioned among us. But I can assure you, it’s worth it. Making poetry a cornerstone of my literacy curriculum has enriched and expanded my sense of what is possible for my students. They are beginning to see themselves as readers and thinkers in ways that I do not think they would if we were working with safer, easier material. I see improvements in their reading, their writing, and the ways that they think about what they read.

Last week, in preparation for a poetry workshop we’ll be attending, I was reading some of the poetry of Martin Espada with my class. We were getting through the poems I had copied more quickly than anticipated, so I asked the class to take a look at the next poem while I went to copy one more. When I returned, they were all laughing, and when I asked them why, one student said, “It’s this poem; it’s funny!” The poem in question, “DSS Dream,” is funny, and I had laughed when I read it before class. I knew my students would enjoy it, but I was far more excited about their response than I would have been if I had been the one leading them through the poem.

Ultimately, I want my students to be independent thinkers, readers, and writers. I want them to read both for information and for pleasure, and I want them to be able to use reading and writing as tools to help them make sense of their lives. The poet Kathleen Norris has insisted that “poets speak with no authority but that which the reader is willing to grant them,” that poets do not attempt to convince readers, but instead, “suggest, evoke, and explore” topics of interest (p.37). My students and I have chosen to let poets speak to us, granting them the authority to share their experience. In the process, our own experience has been deepened and enriched.

#### *Works Cited*

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