

Handing Down Knowledge: A Poetic Apprenticeship

I'm a blue-collar poet. A down-home regular guy who finds poems hiding in the streets, mills, hills, and lakes around my home. I never miss a chance to remind my students of this simple fact. Telling them that I have one foot in the Maine milltown where I grew up, the other in the big north woods that surrounds the town, is how I convince my kids of the possibilities for poetry in their lives.

"How many of you," I ask, "have thought about the role good honest work with one's hands plays in your family background?" (For the rural Maine students that I teach, whose moms and dads work hard in the woods, mills, factories, and seasonal restaurants, this is almost a no-brainer.) "Well, it makes great material for poetry," I tell them.

Many of them, particularly boys, find this intriguing. Poetry and the world of work, what's this all about? So I tell them how my grandfather ladled molten metal into box molds during his years in a foundry. The job was hot, sweaty, sooty; but it was also a trade taught to him QY master molders through a lengthy apprenticeship. Near the end of his life, to assist me in my seventh-grade science fair project, Grandfather made me his honorary apprentice for a week. By taking me into the foundry to learn by watching and then even doing a little of the molder's daily tasks, he handed down a taste of his trade—a gift of inestimable value. I wrote about that experience, I tell my students, in a poem that blended the concrete details of what I had learned about the molder's craft with my ties of affection for my grandfather. They, in turn, can honor their kinship ties with their elders by writing about the working life of the people they know well and in complex ways.

Kids need to see the concrete, work-a-day manner in which poetry is and can be woven into their existence. It's not enough to introduce it to them through specific forms. Nor is it sufficient to teach them the subject by appealing to the liveliness of word play inherent in poetry (though that's a start, and my students enjoy this). Poetry that really grabs kids, whether from rural or rust belt America or suburban Long Island, is poetry grounded in their lives—in kinship, in work, in the informal lessons handed down through families and trusted friends. For adolescents grappling with their new found identities apart from their elders, these connections may not seem the most pressing, but I've found in my poetry classes that many students possess a deep current of understated affection for the passing generations through informal learning around work.

Lev Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, has helped to make us all aware of the social nature of learning. This sociocultural theory of learning has taught me the importance of thinking of poetry as a classroom apprenticeship. Just as with my mini-apprenticeship with Grandfather in the foundry, adolescents learn best in a social atmosphere in which meaningful work is tackled daily in a repeated sequence that grows increasingly familiar to them. While reading the book *Strategic Reading* (Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube, 2001), I found a nice summary of the steps that are used by the teacher and student when learning something new through the expert-apprentice relationship:

1. I Do ~ You Watch
2. I Do ~ You Help
3. You Do ~ I Help
4. You Do ~ I Watch

I keep this progression in mind during writing workshops. It is an elusive ideal, a t times, rarely lining up as outlined above in the creative disorder that typifies collaborative learning. Still, it is a useful template because it 1) focuses my attention on my relationship with individual writers, and 2) gives me that important something to shoot for as my students and I work our way through each successive cycle of the *workshop-drafting* our poems in response to my offered models, *conferencing* with each other formally and informally, *writing* reflectively about each successive draft, and, of course, constantly *trimming* the fat off our poems. In turn, I have found this structure immensely helpful in increasing the chances of meeting four basic needs of kids if they are to respond enthusiastically to poetry:

- Students need poetry that speaks to them, that addresses things they care about.
- Students need to understand the *haw* of poetry.
- Students need to be actively assisted (through modeling, conferencing, etc.) in both reading and writing poetry.
- Students need experiences with poetry that push their understanding and appreciation to the next level.

Meeting these needs can be difficult. What follows is an outline of how I move students through each of those points.

Poetry That Speaks to Kids

How does one find poetic models that vitally portray the things students care about? If the proof is in the poetry writing, I think I've found a handful of useful poetry models that strike a chord in my students' lives. I've always used a mixture of poems, some of them my own, some by other poets, but no matter which model we use, I like to have my students think first of the big idea or theme underlying each poem.

One frequently successful theme is kinship. I call the lesson Handing Down Knowledge. When kids write around this theme, they invariably include concrete and gritty subject matter of deep personal interest to them-material rarely integrated into the "we must cover the curriculum!" mandate of school. This particular poem and the idea of "handing down knowledge" in general allow students to celebrate and relive the things they love to do in the company of people who traditionally show them how, as well as to confront an issue that causes anxiety for many writers, namely that of dealing with one's influences. Handing Down Knowledge has transcended gender through its theme of kinship. I encourage my students to take a broad interpretation of this model, to write the poem *they* want to write, not the one they think *I* want them to write. I make sure they understand that I don't want them to simply imitate the model poems; I want them to seek their own unique poetic voice by emulating and then adapting the model. This gradually moves them from dependence to independence as they learn the processes and engage with the ideas of the poem. In this way, both poetry reading and writing are taught as a symbiotic circle that is relevant to the kids.

One Handing Down Knowledge model that I give my students has a story embedded in the

poem that functions as a tool for remembering how to tie a knot. It is a well-known story in Maine; I would be lost without it when I tie this particular knot! Your students who have been through scouting will probably know this lesson on knot tying. Use this poem as a model to make your own Handing Down Knowledge poem to share with your students. Then encourage students to write their own.

How to Tie a Bowline

Paul Corrigan

With practiced hands the old man cinched the loop
and had me test the knot with all my strength.
"This way," he said, "it doesn't slip or jam."
"Here, let me see," I cried, novice fingers
fumbling with braided coils of line.
But when I tried, my knots kept slipping free
and falling to the floor like lifeless snakes.
Amused, he bent down, scooping up the rope,
his gnarled and ancient hands threading it
up through the loop while telling a story
of a rabbit leaping from its burrow
and a fox who chased him around a tree.
I marveled as the rope became a hare
that leaped up from its hole and glimpsed the fox,
then dashed around the tree and took a dive
back into the safety of its burrow.
Now with this parable in my mind's eye,
I grasped one end and threaded it up through,
around, and back down through the loop.
Proudly the old man grinned, tousled my hair,
as my first bowline found its shape, and held.

Accessing The *How* of Poetry

I work to make the *how* of poetry—the secrets of reading and writing it—visible and accessible to students by making sure students experience poetry orally as well as visually. With "How to Tie a Bowline," I read it to them and let them read it on their own. This poem becomes our model for what makes a successful Handing Down Knowledge poem. The poems students write from this prompt become additional models. See Haley's poem in Figure 1 for an example of a student model.

I constantly remind students to remember all the informal, out-of-school ways knowledge (perhaps better called "know-how" or "street smarts") is passed along to them and, most important, by whom. I believe this exhortation helps kids consider the universal nature of the theme and, if done with enough enthusiasm, takes them into the boiler room of poetry. After all, this collective way we work together and form personal bonds is what makes us profoundly human.

As students begin to "study" the visual aspects of the poem, I focus on three general rules:

1. Only use as many words/ per line/ as you can say/ comfortably/ in one breath;
2. Remember the power of similes;
3. Use stanzas to structure thought.

We address revision in the midst of poetry reading and writing through minilessons and open-ended questions that spark both discussion during peer conferences and thoughtful, self-reflective entries in learning logs. After all, Vygotskian teachers insist that the task situation and the relationships that help to address the task are what produce knowledge (Brown, Collins, and DuGuid, 1989).

Baking Pies with Grandmother

Haley Roberts

All of the ingredients are out,
sugar, flour, milk, and all the rest,
I get out her favorite pie plate,
My grandmother, she gets out the mixer;
Slowly we begin to stir everything together,
taking great care not to forget a thing,
finally, the dough is ready and we lay it out;
My grandmother brings out the rolling pin,
I put flour all over it and the rolling board,
this is done so the dough won't stick,
I gently roll the dough;
My grandmother greases the pie plate,
I lay the crust in it lovingly,
"Now," she says, "Cut about 1/2 inch *off*."
Without any questions, I do as I am told;
We then take our knuckles,
tenderly we imprint around the edge,
"Why," I ask, "do we do this?"
"It makes the pie look prettier and the edge holds better."
Finally we bake it,
not too long, for it must be perfect,
a light golden color is what we want,
the last step is the filling;
Grandmother is proud that her treasure,
her favorite thing has been passed onto me!

Figure 1. Haley's "Handing Down Knowledge" poem

Active Assistance for the Journey

As you can imagine, actively assisting students with their poems through modeling, conferencing, and written feedback is synonymous with apprenticeship. The I Do--You Watch/You Do--I Watch sequence represents the ideal goal of assistance: student independence. This sequence also suggests the dynamic nature that should characterize the relationship between teacher and student. Like the old man teaching young fingers how to tie a bowline, the teacher should demonstrate a caring expertise to students by being on hand as much as possible to advise and listen.

Perhaps the most visible way of assisting in the classroom is through informal teacher-student conferences during writing and revising sessions. Nancie Atwell's (1998) method of having students summarize the current status of their pieces is well known. Sitting on her stool beside their desks, she looks at *them*, not at their writing, and has them explain what they've done to date and where the piece is headed. This is especially practical when considering two or three pages of prose. But I feel a poetic apprenticeship requires more hands-on involvement with kids' work. I *listen* to my students, yes, but I also *read* their poems for the joy of savoring their images. In order to conference intelligently about poetry, one has to see it as well as hear it to attend to visual cues such as line breaks and word placement. As I troubleshoot the poems with them, I am as careful as I can be to preserve the sanctity of ownership of their writing. I try to provide my apprentices with the tools to make their own meaning and find their own solutions.

Moving On

The cyclical structure of a poetic apprenticeship in which the apprentice gains confidence and competence can certainly extend the capabilities of students. Each writing model that I present becomes a poetic problem to be solved through poetic means. Besides Handing Down Knowledge, some other themes that I model through poetry to get my students to think include:

- issues of loss
- kinship
- risk taking
- dealing with fear, and
- transformation

But while this is taking place in individual notebooks, another kind of growth is occurring.

I've adapted a standard writing workshop format that provides my students with the structure they need to become more adept at solving their individual poetic challenges. As, I review the entries in my classroom journal, I see evidence of their increased vocabulary that allows them to talk about the writer's craft; I sense their growing confidence at knowing that they will find their bearings in the thicket of words and see their poems through to the end. From my own work as a poet, I know they are anxious about not seeing the next lines just over the horizon, so it's breathtaking, at times, to see the confident and methodical way many workshop-seasoned students have of coaxing those lines into being. A truly satisfying side effect of this personal growth, though, is to watch it flow into the classroom at large. By reading student's learning logs, I often discover who the more capable peers are in the class--those kids whose critical abilities I would trust with my own work and whose special knack of working with

others allows for classroom harmony and creative industry. If I meet these kids' needs, I know they can help me extend the capabilities of their classmates to new levels.

Integrating and Meeting the Big Goals

I don't teach poetry as a unit. For me, poetry is about deep themes, about what matters most to us as human beings. I try to teach it as an integral part of everything we study throughout the year: units on our own identity and values, on personal transformations, on work and careers, on civil rights and social justice. In fact, I can't think of a single theme that can't be addressed with poetry.

That said, I can't help commenting that this "handing down knowledge" theme best summarizes Vygotskian insights (1978) about teaching and learning. Vygotsky argued that all learning is metaphorical because it proceeds from the known to the new. The learning is the connection that is made, the bridge between the student's present concerns and knowledge and the attainment of new interests, abilities, and understandings. Vygotsky posits that these connections are achieved through a relationship with a teacher anyone who understands what you can do with help that you can't yet do on your own and then provides you with that help so you can outgrow yourself and become something new. Handing Down Knowledge poems show students how I learned something new through relationship and reminds me to attend to my students' current interests, knowledge, and needs as I ask them to be and know more.

My goal for my middle schoolers is that they come away from any of our studies with the "big understandings," and that they have a handle on the strategies of learning and expression that will allow them to explore these concepts on their own. And I want them to love learning and expression, especially as it relates to poetry. Of course, the achievement of these goals for poetry can't be measured through standardized tests, so I must find my evidence in how they read, talk about, and write poems. The proof, I might say, is in how they extend and build on their own experience to see and understand in a new way.

References

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