A Multidisciplinary Approach to Teaching Poetry in the Classroom

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Poetry is a powerful tool to further trust and empathy within the classroom while teaching skills that align with elementary curricula. In the classroom, poetry encourages students to express themselves while supporting writing, comprehension, reading proficiency, and public speaking skills. Modeled after other successful writing-in-the-schools programs across the country, the Young Poets program in Billings, Montana engages students Grades 3–12 in creative brainstorming, analysis, and problem solving, while creative writing fosters a sense of agency in these students, who begin to see themselves as writers. Across 12 weeks, students develop an appreciation for the work of their peers and develop an ability to articulate their work aloud to others. In this chapter, journalist, poet, and educator Anna Paige discusses her successes and missteps teaching poetry in the classroom and how she's adapted this model to fit with a Title 1 school in Billings, Montana.

INTRODUCTION

"Hello! My name is Art."

This name tag, stuck to Krista Leigh Pasini's shirt, gave more than one student pause as she introduced herself to a room full of fourth graders in Billings, Montana.

"Is anyone else out there named Art?" A few students tentatively raised their hands, and so did I.

Art is Pasini's world. It's not segmented into a specific hour of the day; it's within everything she does. A graduate of Goddard College, she earned an MFA in Interdisciplinary Art in 2019, yet she pushes back on the idea that in order to do "art," one has to have gone to school or had formal training. "There

is innovation and agility in creativity, and it requires imagination. I think that art lives in everything we do," she told me during an interview for *The Billings Gazette* in November 2019.

I'm a journalist by trade, as well as an educator. I've taught college writing courses and also teach poetry in the elementary schools. Traditionally, poetry lessons are one hour across 12 weeks, and through poetry, students learn techniques to express themselves. As my comfort with teaching poetry progressed, I began to stretch the boundaries of what a traditional writing program could look like. From a luthier who beatboxes to a dancer that improvises to classical heavy metal, I've brought in guests that elevated writing lessons and provided a look into the many ways that art shows up in their lives. I've found students are more responsive when I incorporate various disciplines along with poetry lessons, so I've found innovative ways to bring artists together while teaching fundamentals of creative writing and poetry.

With Pasini and Texas-based dance artist Erica Gionfriddo, a new writing lesson came to life. Both Pasini and Gionfriddo's work has primarily in movement, yet they push traditional choreography and mingle disciplines to challenge audiences. This isn't a new concept. From beatniks to Igor Stravinsky, mixing art in challenging ways has been a staple of artistic communities. In the early 1900s, Stravinsky created a ballet set to what has been described as the world's first heavy metal concert. Armed with nametags and orchestral head-banging tunes, Art stormed the classroom that day. Gionfriddo, who was in town to perform with the Billings Symphony, showcased some of the movements she would present onstage. Gionfriddo gathered students in a circle, and hit play on *Rite of Spring*, Stravinsky's expansive piece of music commissioned by Ballets Russes in 1913.

"Closer," she asked. They bunched together, hesitantly. "Even closer." The circle closed into a mash of fourth graders, all buzzing. Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* is a jarring piece of music, a gyration between highly energetic passages contrasted with Russian folk tunes. It's discordant, booming with timpani, yet ebbs into syrupy pairings, like the grumbling alto flute with the peppy oboe, and is often overwhelmingly bright with brass. Some of the students expressed concern; they couldn't see. "You don't need to see," Gionfriddo replied. "You just need to listen." Movement up, down, back, forth, the mash of students bounces, a chaotic, yet choreographed frenzy. From one side of the room to the next, they move with Gionfriddo, this strange dancer with nimble limbs a buzzed haircut who has convinced them that they, too, can dance (Paige, 2019).

With the students abuzz from dancing, it was difficult to bring the lesson back to writing. I've taught poetry in elementary school classrooms for four years, and I've stumbled plenty as a teacher. I've lost a classroom to chaos plenty of times, and at first, it terrified me. I responded first as an authoritarian, a disciplinarian, and even used shame as a tactic to get students to pay attention. There are some things in classroom the for which no textbook can prepare you. The students in corners, snickering, and you are certain they are making fun of you. The first time you read about death in a student's handwriting or are trusted with a child's most confidential thoughts.

I asked students to write down three things they observed. It could be color, feelings, memories, emotions. These would become their fuel, a brainstorm to generate ideas and make something from the experience, whether it be a poem or drawing, even a dance they could choreograph themselves.

"Crazy."
"Happy."
"Clumsy."
"Weird."

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