

# 1 Everyday Poets

Poetry—merely whispering its name frightens everyone away” (43), says former Poet Laureate Rita Dove. Poetry frightens many of my students because it conjures up images of the impossibly distant past—like speaking Babylonian or medieval tournament jousting—not their immediate lives right here, right now.

But poetry is not a past-tense activity. Poetry is around us all the time—why, right now it’s in this room in what we see, hear, taste, touch, and smell; it’s on the radio in song lyrics and raps; it’s on the playground in jump rope chants and basketball trash talk; it’s in everyday conversations, in the things that go unsaid and in the things we don’t yet have the words to say. Poetry is already in our lives, and poetry can help us more fully participate in our own lives and in the lives of others.

While I know that only the rare student will aspire to become a professional poet or a career writer, I want my students to see their writing as part of their lives, not an end in itself. To do this, we must eliminate, in John Dewey’s words, “the gap between the child’s experience and the various forms of subject matter that make up the course of study” (*Selected* 344). Poetry writing allows their experiences *to be* the course of study.

Poetry instruction in schools often feels artificial, consisting of little more than gimmicky exercises that have no audience but the teacher and no life outside the classroom. Such formulaic exercises have little to do with poetry because they have little to do with life. As Louise Rosenblatt has argued, literature needs to be “rescued from its diminished status as a body of subject matter, and offered as a mode of personal life experience” (x).

In this book, I present some ways teachers can use students’ personal life experiences to (1) help students become less afraid and more comfortable with poetry and (2) help students see how poetry writing and performance connect to their lives and how poetry can enrich their lives.

## **In My Life**

My students’ attitude toward poetry as something distant and frightening is an attitude I know well. Their feelings parallel my own experiences with poetry.

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I loved nursery rhymes as a child. I especially loved the Dr. Seuss books. I remember playing rhyming games with my mother as we walked home from Mayfair Park, and trying out primitive puns on my brother's and sisters' names as a youngest child's desperate last defense. I loved listening to animal poems in elementary school and then crawling around on the floor to act out the words.

Then poetry abruptly stopped for me. I'm not saying I never heard a teacher read a poem again in a classroom. The only thing I remember about the rest of my school life is that it all happened so fast. I didn't really get a good look at it.

Aside from a required Shakespeare class, I almost managed to avoid taking a single poetry class throughout college and graduate school. The one notable exception was a class called Anglo-Irish Literature taught by Professor F. X. Kinahan, a fiery, rotund Irishman with a big red beard and a flair for the dramatic. I loved reading Yeats, and I especially loved to hear Mr. Kinahan read Yeats. His readings were spectacular—little theater pieces, really. Like the rest of the class, I was enthralled by his performances and in awe of his delivery, the way he'd linger over a line as though he were reading from his own personal musical score: "Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days." I believed, at the time, that he had *The Gift* (and not the *Gift of the Gab*, which he also had), the innate ability to read, understand, and perform poetry. I was equally convinced that I did not.

Otherwise, I steered clear of poetry classes. I remember being terrified when a friend tried to talk me into signing up for a poetry writing class. The very idea of writing a poem seemed completely foreign to me. (I had never even seen a Grecian urn until I visited my wife Eleni's house before our marriage.) And, if I had actually tried my hand at writing a poem, I certainly would have kept it quiet. Nobody talks about poetry, do they?

Poetry was simply not for me, I thought, and I held this view for at least the first ten years of my teaching career. I thought poetry should be taught by people like Patricia, a colleague during my first year of high school teaching, which was in a big suburban public school. Pat was sort of an Earth Mother: dangling earrings, bright floral scarves, and an astonishing array of clothing homespun by native peoples. She had founded the school's literary magazine, *The Egg*. While my students pored over texts in their seats, Pat's students practiced "creative movement" exercises and yoga positions; while we discussed and debated evidence, they learned new breathing techniques.

Like many teachers, I used poetry only to meet certain curricular

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demands, or if I was pressed for time. The poems my students wrote were often formulaic gimmicks found in textbooks: acrostic and anagram poems, limericks, and haiku taught in the rigid 5-7-5 syllable mode. My students were as terrified as I was to try their hands at “real poetry.”

It’s not hard to find the source of this fear. I’m looking at a literature textbook right now that has reprinted Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 with an activity below: “A sonnet is a 14-line poem written in iambic pentameter. Try one of your own.” Reading a prompt like this, who wouldn’t conclude that poetry is reserved for geniuses?

Inspired by school visits from poets such as Luis Rodriguez and Naomi Shihab Nye, however, I started to read more contemporary poetry. The immediacy of poets reading their own work was exciting. I decided to read whatever I liked, to let the poets I enjoyed reading recommend other poets to read, and never to apologize for putting aside a poem I didn’t like or understand.

Like many of my students, I also listened to contemporary music. (I play the guitar and used to select the music for a folk music radio show.) I especially loved songwriting with thoughtful lyrics: Bob Dylan, Melissa Etheridge, Ira Gershwin, Chuck D, Dave Frishberg. So I decided (as I knew many teachers had before me) to use pop songs as a means of understanding poems. I’ll never forget how a student named Buddy—who had very little interest in school—created a slide show of his own photographs to illustrate the differences between Paul Simon’s “The Sound of Silence” and a Gwendolyn Brooks poem about urban Chicago. Or how Angel—a gangbanger who’ll never graduate,” I’d been told—compared generational attitudes toward fathers in Dylan Thomas’s “Youth Calls to Age” with a rap song by Sir Mix-a-Lot. I felt like I was really on to something: My students had a great deal to say and a desperate urge to express themselves. Poetry gave them the voice to do this.

I read everything on teaching poetry I could find. I especially liked Kenneth Koch’s books (such as *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?*; *Wishes, Lies and Dreams*; and *Sleeping on the Wing*, with Kate Farrell) and began having my students write poems in imitation of famous poets. Having a good model to follow is as effective in writing poems as it is for every other kind of writing. But writing “in the style of” another poet is necessarily limiting. Many books left me frustrated by their vague directions (“Write about a special dream”) or suggestions that seemed to overdetermine the resulting poem (“Write a poem about a physical trait of yours you wish you could change”). The variety and creativity of my

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students' work always reminds me how important it is to give students a range of models (moods, forms, ideas) for each poem assignment so that they have a chance to write about something they are passionate about even if it means leaving the models behind.

One day, when I told the class they'd have fun writing their next poem (a poem requiring them to interview a friend), a student said, "If it's so much fun, you do it." I did, and have tried every assignment I have given since. Writing poems with the class has helped me understand difficulties inherent in the assignment. It also creates tremendous trust with my students, who see me working alongside them. If it's worth my time, it must be worth theirs, they seem to say. More than that, I really have fun writing these poems with my students—the kind of fun I had as a boy, playing alongside Dr. Seuss. And I am very proud of some of what I have written, even if not all of my poems are entirely successful.

Pride is clear in what my students write too. At the end of the year, they routinely report that, of all the writing they do, they are most proud of a single poem they have written. By writing poems, my students have not only studied literature, but they have also created it. And, at the end of the day, their feeling of accomplishment is what I am most proud of.

## Teaching Poetry

I don't write poems. Actually, I used to write poems, but I can't write anymore. (I've tried.) You'd have to be a wizard or something, and magic is something I'm kind of short on these days!

—grade 10 student

This student was responding to a questionnaire I passed out on the first day of school. One of my first goals every year is to demystify poetry because this student, like many of my students, enters the class convinced she lacks the requisite capacity for literary wizardry. Yet her writing does possess a sort of magic. She uses a metaphor (though interestingly she changes the pronoun from "I" to "you" in describing the hypothetical word wizard). Also, she uses a figure of speech in imagining that an abstract quality like magic can be something she could run out of. And yet she is scared by poetry.

To minimize my students' fears, I begin my classes by asking students to play around with words. As poet Donald Hall says, "All poets start from love of words and wordplay" (69). My initial poetry writing exercises (starting in Chapter 2) begin with everyday words and phrases: ice cream brands, album titles, common objects found around the house.

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These activities are designed to demystify poetry and to build confidence.

These early exercises are shorter (single-word lines, relatively simple lists) than later assignments for several reasons. Students find short assignments less daunting, and everyone can write and have fun with these poem exercises. Also, very short poems ensure immediate feedback. With everyone's short poems on the board, we can ask specific questions together: Why start with that word? What if you switched these two words? Students spontaneously revise and rearrange on the spot.

Since all of the exercises that follow build on previous assignments, this book can be used to guide a full unit of poetry; however, the exercises also work independently as discrete lessons. Depending on students' ages and abilities, teachers can choose the exercises that best fit their curricula. In my classes, as students grow more confident I gradually ask them to write longer, more complicated poems. These poems will be less intimidating because students can use skills they have accumulated from earlier exercises and because we work from model poems written by professional poets and by fellow students alike.

## Using Models

Most of the poetry exercises in this book are derived from patterns I've noticed in poems I love. The "sliding doors" poem in Chapter 7, for example, comes from Billy Collins's "I Go Back to the House for a Book" and from David Hernandez's "Sun-Times." The speaker in Collins's poem reflects on how his life is different, richer, because of a decisive action he took. Hernandez's hilarious poem shows the consequences of *not* acting. This speaker averts a nuclear holocaust and saves the world by deciding against stealing his neighbor's newspaper.

I give several student models alongside the professional models with each assignment. Here I agree with Joseph Tsujimoto, who says that "giving students many examples, by both students and adults, can actually encourage original poetry" (10). Offering diverse models suggests a greater number of possibilities to students, forces them to negotiate which forms and patterns will help them best convey their thoughts, and eliminates the notion that there is somehow a "right answer," a model to be followed exactly. (Note: Most of the student models in this book come from my English classes, grades 8–12, at the University of Chicago Lab Schools. I have also included some samples from elementary school and junior high poetry classes I have taught during the summer. These classes included students from public and private

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schools throughout Chicago. I do not usually tell my students the ages of the authors—unless they ask—and I have used these models in classes and workshops with students who have ranged in age from eight to eighty.)

### **The Teacher as Coach**

Because I want students to see poetry as something useful and vital in their lives outside of school, I see my role as that of a coach rather than a critic. I stand on the sidelines with students—not across the desk from them—helping them consider the best strategies for reaching their various audiences and writing aims. Since I am not necessarily their intended reader, I am not the final arbiter of whether a poem is effective; however, I'm happy to tell students what I think of the choices they've made and how successfully their poem achieves their desired effects. I try to phrase suggestions as questions: Can you say this in fewer words? Is it necessary to repeat this idea here? Why did you choose to switch tenses in the second stanza? Will the lack of punctuation here confuse your readers?

I don't assign letter grades to poems, but this is not because I don't believe that poems can be judged. Rather, I mark poems with a +, a  $\checkmark$ , or a  $\surd$  in terms of their *completeness*. Rather than say, "Yes, this is a great poem" or "No, this one isn't any good," I say, "Great job! This poem fully completes the assignment and was lots of fun to read," or "This is a good start, but the second section needs to be developed more fully. Let's revise this together."

### **Revision**

I allow students to revise their poems as many times as they like. This minimizes their fears of "making mistakes," and it encourages kids to take risks, to try new ways of using language. Even students who rarely revise write more boldly knowing the safety net of revision hangs beneath them. (Note: I'll briefly outline my feelings toward revision here, but I offer a longer discussion and much more specific classroom strategies in Chapter 9.)

Poet Mary Oliver says she usually has to "revise through forty or fifty drafts of a poem before [she] begins to feel content with it. Other poets take longer" (111). While I confess I don't usually revise my own drafts fifty times, I have never written anything that has not undergone substantial revision after the initial draft. I tell my students about the time I had to rewrite a five-word haiku twice before a literary editor

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accepted the poem. Students deserve the same opportunity to keep shaping a piece until they and their readers are satisfied with it. When I mention this revision policy to teachers, they sometimes gasp: “You mean every student can revise everything as often as they want?” Yes, but the number of takers is *very* small, partly because my students don’t want to increase their own workload, and partly because I insist on meeting briefly with students to find out why they are interested in revising.

If a student wants to revise merely to fulfill the assignment, I might have him or her revise a portion of the poem (“Rewrite two sensory descriptions,” for example, or “See if you can rewrite the first stanza using half the number of words”). If, however, the student poet is genuinely interested in revising the poem for his or her own sake (like the girl last year who said she wanted to keep writing to find out why her grandmother’s music box mattered so much to her), I am happy to look at multiple drafts. It is not common for students to be so intrinsically motivated. Many students consider substantial revision only when they are preparing a final draft for publication. For this reason, our writing assignments culminate in publishing classroom collections as well as books written by individual authors.

### **Author-izing Students**

Creating books of poems is a great way for students to see their work in new ways and a great way to help students see themselves as poets. My students publish collective “class books,” and individual books as well. Both kinds of publishing help to achieve Dewey’s unifying aim of education: “the growth of the child in the direction of social capacity and service, and his more vital union with life” (*Selected* 80). In other words, publishing books lets students do the work of professional writers and also face the same challenges these writers face.

In compiling class books, it is essential that everyone submit the same number of poems, or perhaps the same number of pages, since the length of poems varies dramatically. This page limitation forces students to review their body of work and to choose those poems suitable for a more general audience. Writing books helps to turn the classroom into a community of writers, and it gives students with different skills—word processing, layout, drawing—a special chance to excel.

Writing individual books has become another hugely important part of my course. For years I asked students to maintain writing portfolios, file folders stuffed with multiple revisions of poems. Then one year an eleventh-grade student whose father had died during the

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middle of our poetry unit showed me how to use these folders in a more significant way. Although this boy missed a lot of school, he wrote a great deal during this time, and he found poetry to be an important release for his new and overwhelming feelings. When he turned in all his missing work, he had entitled his folder “Reflections in a Cracked Mirror,” and he wrote a letter of introduction explaining the source of some of the poems and a rationale for the order in which he had placed them. This student showed me how the process of collecting poems could imitate the work professional poets do: selecting and ordering poems, titling their collections, explaining their sources, and offering a statement of introduction. Perhaps most important, this project gives students a chance to revisit their work, retrace their thoughts over an extended creative period, and measure their growth as writers. Students are often amazed at the topics they’ve chosen to return to: a grandmother, a favorite pet, friendships, dreams.

My students do not have to copy and bind these books, but their sense of accomplishment is great nonetheless. The books are a testament to the work they have done, not only the written work but also the work of discovering themselves and the world around them more fully. Their pride is as clear on their faces as it is in their writing.

At one point, several students started an online journal called *The Paper Tango*. The journal, as the students described it, encouraged submissions from all students—they even solicited electronic manuscripts from students at other schools. Their goal was to reach a wider audience, and they encouraged comments on any and all poems they posted. The only stipulation they made was that only a reader who had submitted a poem could comment on the poetry of others. They also went out of their way to let readers know that “all work posted on *The Paper Tango* is work in progress.” They emphasized writing as a process and saw poetry as a means of building a larger community of writers and sharing their ideas with an audience outside the classroom.

## Poetry and Performance

Poetry is too often taught as a solipsistic act: something to be done in private, like keeping a secret diary, with no regard for an audience beyond the poet. As Stanley Kunitz has pointed out, however, poetry “must be felt to be understood, and before it can be felt it must be heard. Poets listen for their poems, and we, as readers, must listen in turn. If we listen hard enough, who knows? We too may break into dance” (qtd. in Janeczko 74). Performing poetry offers students the opportunity to celebrate language through a wide range of media, including the instru-

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ment of their own voices.

This celebration of language is what Dana Gioia urges in his book *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture*:

The sheer joy of the art must be emphasized. The pleasure of poetry is what first attracts children to poetry, the sensual excitement of speaking and hearing the words of the poem. Performance was also the teaching technique that kept poetry vital for centuries. Perhaps it holds the key to poetry's future. (23)

Much of the excitement and vitality in my classes comes when students discover their own reading voices and reinvent their own language in order to communicate their most important ideas and feelings.

Students need as much positive feedback and encouragement when reading poems as they do when writing poems. So we applaud every reading. Applause goes a long way toward creating a community of writers and reminds students they are not merely writing poems for class. They have a larger audience (and an adoring public!).

In my classes, each poem is read twice, once by the author and then by a classmate. Students learn about their own poems through the differences in the readings—changes in tone, different ways of reading lines, punctuation. It is important to move outside the classroom as well. At most poetry readings, the audience sits quietly for thirty minutes or an hour and applauds only at the end. The audience is expected to attend with silent reverence, as though at a church service. (This may explain why some poetry readings—and some church services—are so poorly attended!) *Wordplaygrounds* ends, as my classes do, with suggestions for organizing public readings, dramatizing poems, and integrating poetry with other disciplines.

The school day is so fragmented that it is easy to forget how isolated our classes can become and how chaotic and random much of our students' learning must seem to them. Dewey argued that "school as a whole is [to be] related to life as a whole" (*Selected* 80). We need to find ways of connecting disciplines and working on common rather than competing academic timetables. Finding common areas of interest and study will not only help our students make more sense of their learning but also help us all remember why our work matters so much. My students learn quickly that poetry is not something foreign to their experience; it *is* their experience. Poetry offers students the opportunity to explore their language, their world, and themselves more deeply than they otherwise would. Perhaps most important, writing and performing poetry help my students see that they are not just studying literature, they are also creating it.

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Poetry, my students come to understand, is not something to fear, but rather an invitation to participate fully in our everyday lives. Here, for example, is the advice of one student who entered the class convinced he “could not ever write a poem”:

### **Don't Be Afraid**

Writing poetry  
Is not as daunting as it sounds.  
All you have to have done  
To write poetry  
Is to have lived.  
  
I'm alive,  
So I can write poetry.  
Anyone reading this is presumably alive;  
Therefore, you too  
Are capable of writing poetry.  
  
Once you establish  
That you are, in fact, alive,  
Your poetry may be governed  
By your mood. If you're hungry,  
For example, there's an excellent chance  
That your poem will reflect your hunger.  
  
Some choose to be coy with their meanings  
And highfalutin' with their language  
("Bubbles in an IV loitering" or  
"Museums mark their bodies down")  
  
This is okay sometimes,  
But you don't want to hide  
Your poem's meaning  
From the reader altogether.  
  
Do you understand now  
Why writing poetry is not as hard  
As you thought?  
  
Proof of life, mood, language:  
Three simple steps  
And your poetry  
Will flow  
Like water.  
  
—Rob, grade 10

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