

Poetry and World War II: Creating Community through Content-Area Writing

Before we started to do the unit, and way before I met you, I thought, OH NO! I can't RYHME [sic]! I can't write POEMS!

—Kira

A few short months before Kira (all names are pseudonyms) wrote this, we might have thought the same thing about her and her classmates. As two educators—a teacher and a media specialist—with little experience teaching poetry, we had no idea how students in this fifth-grade classroom would react to the expectation of writing in this genre.

Most of them had never written poems outside of scattered experience using the basic forms taught in many American classrooms, such as acrostics and diamantes. Through a unit combining poetry and the social studies curriculum, we learned the power of poetic language as a way for students to develop an enjoyment and affinity for poetry while engaging with historical facts, ideas, and questions in an authentic and meaningful way.

As we began planning our unit, we were particularly intrigued with the possibilities of integrating poetry into the social studies curriculum (Holbrook, 2005). Given the relentless pressure to meet benchmarks for student achievement along with our own interest in integrating poetry into student learning and writing, exploring this connection between social studies and poetry was an interesting prospect.

We planned multiple approaches to engage this diverse group of learners, relying on several

book-length texts as well as articles and reflective pieces by experienced teachers of poetry (Flynn & McPhillips, 2000; Heard, 1999; Holbrook, 2005). Instead of rigid forms and isolated poetic devices, these authors suggest that students learn poetry by reading, listening to, and talking about poetry, and then, finally, writing their own. Minilessons on the craft of writing poetry usually evolve organically from the writing or questions of students themselves. Poetry is shared, discussed, integrated, and practiced throughout the school year and across the curriculum (Five, 1989; Siemens, 1996). With these principles in mind, we set out to share poetry with our students.

Planning for this unit involved integrating standards from social studies and language arts. At the same time, we selected prose, poetry, and picturebooks, and discussed possible poetic techniques and tools to connect our selections with our poetic and content-based classroom goals. We used both social studies and writing periods to teach this three-week unit, allowing students more time to write and engage with the material. This amounted to approximately one and a half to two hours per day of dedicated work, in addition to time students spent working on their poetry at home and at other times during the school day. What resulted was an experience that amazed us, in terms of the students' level of engagement, their enthusiasm for reading and writing poetry, the historical issues they confronted, and the quality of work they produced.

SIDE TRIP: ACCESSING HISTORY THROUGH POETRY

To accompany this excellent description of the use of poetry with adolescent learners, we offer the following resources to further extend the teaching of poetry on World War II and other topics. We also include places for students to publish their completed work.

- Second World War Poetry (www.angelfire.com/wa/warpoetry/Ww2.html)
This website provides poetry written about World War II. Included are poems of the most decorated hero in American history, Audie Murphy. Social studies teachers can use this site to incorporate prose and poetry focused on the war era.
- Goldensohn, L. (2006). *American war poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press.
The anthology is chronologically organized around wars that involved Americans. American men, women, nurses, soldiers, reporters, and civilians write about their experiences of war. This comprehensive anthology can be used across numerous grade levels and different content areas.
- Graves, D. (1992). *Explore poetry*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
This book incorporates the reading and writing of poetry. Donald Graves provides a detailed volume including ways to incorporate read-alouds, tips for writing poems from prose, and ideas on how to develop poems from choral readings. The final section offers ways of incorporating poetry throughout the curriculum, integrating it with the study of science, history, and mathematics.
- Johnston, P. (2004). *Choice words: How our language affects children's learning*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
The book explains and demonstrates the way a teacher's language affects student learning. Throughout the book, Johnston provides narratives of student-teacher dialogue in order to specifically show how words impact students' decisions in the classroom. The book would support teachers in their efforts to conference with students during independent writing.
- Modern American Poetry (<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/holocaust/holocaust.htm>)
This online journal includes an extensive study of modern American poetry, including historical backgrounds, analyses of poems, biographical information, relevant illustrations, statements on poetics, and interviews. Additionally, the website offers commentary about many poets. One section of the website is devoted entirely to the Holocaust. This section includes poetry, pictures, maps, essays, reflections, and a glossary.
- The National Arts and Education Network (<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/content/3796/>)
This website provides detailed, standards-based lesson plans comparing poems written from different perspectives during World War II. Students can analyze poems in order to gain a deeper understanding of how different perspectives affect texts. Moreover, visual arts, social studies, and language arts are incorporated in the lessons.
- Poetry.org (www.poetry.org)
This website highlights the history and meaning of poetry. This site would be a wonderful supplemental resource for teachers and students during their study of the poetry genre. Also, there is a resource page that provides links to various poetry pages for daily poetry, poetry organizations, and poet biographies.
- The Poetry Society of America (www.poetrysociety.org)
The Poetry Society of America provides a national events calendar that lists poetry activities. Students and teachers can find poems by title, author, or a line in a poem on this site. Other key features include creative writing programs, contests, conferences, festivals, literary organizations, poetry publishers, and poetry journals. For a membership fee, the website also offers a subscription to *Crossroads: The Journal of the Poetry Society of America*, admission to all PSA events, and an anthology of poems.

SIDE TRIP: ACCESSING HISTORY THROUGH POETRY (CONTINUED)

- Sloan, G. (2003). *Give them poetry! A guide for sharing poetry with children K–8*. New York: Teachers College Press.
This book is a guide for teachers to use when teaching poetry. Throughout the handbook, there are introductions to children’s poets and their poetry, advice about learning from the poems themselves, practical ideas to teach poetry, and ways to encourage poetry writing. Student examples are also provided to help guide teachers during their unit study.
- Teen Ink (<http://teenink.com/index.php>)
Teen Ink includes a national teen magazine, a book series, and a website for teens. Not only can students use the site as a resource, but it is also a forum for students to publish their work. The organization focuses on helping adolescents share their own writing, while developing reading, writing, and critical-thinking skills.
- 120 War Poems (<http://website.lineone.net/~nusquam/wptitle.htm>)
This site offers poems around specific wars from the last century. The poems are indexed by author, title, and specific wars. There is also a brief author biographical section included on the website.

—Kendall Kiser and Karen Wood

List Poems

The poem “World War II” by Carol Diggory Shields (2005) served as an introduction to the unit. We posted this poem on chart paper, encouraging the students to read it silently several times and to think about the language and content. Discussion followed, focusing on historical elements of the poem that they recognized or wondered about and aspects of the writing that they liked. Using a poem to introduce a unit was an interesting way to get students thinking about the topic, articulating what they already knew, and making predictions about what they were going to learn. From this poem, they surmised that we would be talking about an enormous battle that involved a great deal of human suffering.

The Shields poem features several short lists interspersed throughout. We focused on the short list of dictators embedded in it (“Hitler, Tojo, Mussolini”) as an opportunity for concentrated study. Flynn & McPhillips (2000) discuss list poems as a possible way to create “more room for risk taking by struggling writers, and for surprise by those more accomplished” (p. 65). We knew that these students had little experience writing

poetry. We also learned quickly that we were battling attitudes about poetry that students had taken on over their educational lives. At the very moment we began the silent reading of the Shields poem, a student mumbled, “I hate poetry.” We decided to begin with list poems, since list poems are, in our view, one of the more accessible ways to introduce students to the writing of poetry. Creating a list poem hardly feels like “writing poetry” at all; this form helped free some students from their preconceived, narrow definitions of poetry.

We divided the students into three groups, each focused on one of the dictators. Each student received information about the assigned dictator and was tasked with becoming an “expert” on that person. We explained that they were to choose from the provided information several powerful and specific words that would be associated with or descriptive of that figure. After some time with their information and a brief opportunity to discuss it with other classmates, we made lists of these powerful words as a class.

This first task, choosing poetic language and creating a list as a group, was a challenge. We were

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met with blank stares as we tried to encourage them to share examples of specific, poetic language. When we went a step further and asked them to think of some original terms, the language they came up with was often flat and very factual. We had hoped that they would be able to think

more deeply and offer some conclusions or observational language, but the questions we asked of them were clearly unfamiliar. As we created a list of words together, we discussed possibilities for shaping these words into poetry, including arrangements of the words and the use of white space, alliteration, and other poetic conventions. After the class list was completed, students were given the task of experimenting with these powerful words, as well as any other words about the assigned dictator that they chose. Kira’s dictator poem was written over several days following the lesson.

Hitler is . . .

by Kira

Hitler is . . .

Who causes rainy days.

What puts you in a daze.

Who gets you lost in a maze.

The one who causes a craze.

Hitler is what makes you gaze.

Poetry from Photographs

We then turned to eliciting poetry from historic photographs. We focused this lesson on the Hitler Youth, thinking that pictures of youth may strike a chord. One valuable source of photos was the recent book *Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler’s Shadow* (Bartoletti, 2005). After sharing background information about the groups pictured and their historical context, we let the students choose from a variety of pictures of the Hitler Youth. We suggested that they might think about the pictures

in several ways: they could describe the picture and the actions taking place, consider the picture in light of questions they might ask the people in it, or imagine what it would be like to be in the picture themselves.

Through our discussions and the writings of the students, the role of questions in poetry emerged as our minilesson for the day. Many of the topics in this study, including Hitler Youth, brought up questions for the students. Some were factual, but we all came to realize that often, poets’ questions cannot be answered simply, if at all. We discussed the poet as questioner, and how questions might be used as a poetic tool. As the two of us circulated throughout the room, the tone of our discussions with students began to change.

Conferencing with student poets was one of the more challenging skills we had to develop quickly as the unit progressed. With neither of us experienced teachers of poetry, it was often difficult to know what to say. As educators of writers, we believed in the premise that one of the most damaging things we can do to young writers is focus on harsh criticism or negativity toward their work, especially at early stages. Adapting the approach of Filbrandt (1999), we decided to emphasize the positive aspects of their writing, and tell them what we, as readers, would like to know more about. We also made an effort to point out instances when students were using techniques in their work that are “things poets do,” including repeated language, powerful imagery, or effective alliteration. It was these small noticings (Flynn and McPhillips, 2000) that began to change the climate of the classroom. The following example was based on a photograph of a group of Hitler Youth saluting Hitler as he paraded by.

Nazi Salute

by Agnes

Nazi salute, Nazi salute

Students, teachers, soldiers

Flags so high in the sky

They touch the clouds

Buildings, schools silent

Wolves creep at night

Nazi salute, Nazi salute

Students began to share their work with one another spontaneously; they read aloud to each other in pairs or small groups. We also encouraged students to share their work with the class as a whole. Many were anxious to do this, and accepted praise as well as feedback graciously. They honored each other with careful listening and consideration. Even the student who described herself as one who “hates poetry” shared her writing enthusiastically. Soon, these students began to see themselves as poets.

Writing from Artifacts

We led our next lesson with *Who Was the Woman Who Wore the Hat?* (Patz, 2003), a book-length illustrated poem made up of a long series of wonderings about a hat that the speaker had seen in the Holocaust Museum. It incorporates historical facts, with numerous questions about the particular woman who owned this hat and how it came to be in the museum. One approach to writing poetry incorporates the use of objects or artifacts to inspire students to write (Flynn & McPhillips, 2000; Heard, 1999). Since this poem focuses on thoughts and questions related to a specific object, we used it as an entry into creating poetry based on artifacts.

We read the book aloud to the students, then discussed things the poet did that were interesting, which allowed for a deeper exploration of the poet as questioner. For example, she asked different kinds of questions, ranging from wondering about the woman’s identity and whom she loved, to whether she put cream in her coffee. One student noticed that she repeated the question about how she took her coffee several times, and the class discussed reasons why the poet may have chosen this small detail to highlight. Both large and small questions were represented in this book; both types were important. But if this woman died in the Holocaust, the answers to most of the questions asked by the speaker in the poem were lost with her. Students were engaged by this book and the issues it addressed.

Before the lesson, we gathered some “artifacts” for students to examine. This collection in-

cluded hats, articles of clothing, books, jewelry, and small personal items, many of which came from our own attics, having belonged to parents or grandparents. While the items were old, we made it clear they were not actual historical artifacts with a particular provenance from the World War II era. Instead, they functioned as concrete representations through which students could imagine historical situations and ownership.

Students selected an artifact that they wanted to write about. They could describe the item, think about who might have owned it, make a list of questions about the item, or take any other approach they felt was appropriate. We asked them to situate the item in the period of World War II, but gave little other direction. The classroom had an energized silence as the students considered these items and their imagined history.

After approximately a half hour of writing, several students were interested in sharing their work with the class. Many of the poems they wrote reflected depth and insight, as well as historical understandings. The following poem was written about an old timepiece.

Broken Time

by Elaine

For all the many people who thought
This non-working watch would slow down time
And help them hide from Hitler
I hope that you were right.
Broken time, broken time,
Do you feel my tears?
Broken time, broken time,
Do you know our fears?
Broken time, broken time,
Can you help us live?

Two-Voice Poems

The culminating activity for this unit was writing two-voice poems. At this point, in addition to the lessons described so far, we had discussed many other aspects of World War II, Hitler, the Holocaust, Pearl Harbor, the Japanese-American Internment, and other events and personalities of this era. We planned to use this two-voice poem format to encourage students to synthesize their knowledge of the many conflicting points of view

that characterized this period in history.

We began with interactive modeling of the process of writing a two-voice poem. The students chose a member of the Hitler Youth and a Jewish child as the poem's two speakers. As a group, we brain-stormed long lists for each of these two individuals, focusing on clothing they may have worn, items they might have carried, phrases they

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could have said or thought, and feelings they might have had. Afterwards, we went about the process of noticing connections between the two voices, as well as points of opposition. For example, the phrase "I'm scared" appeared on both lists, representing a possible line that both voices would recite simultaneously. Points of opposition included clothing these two may have worn, as well as thoughts about allegiances and emotions.

We did not follow this process through to the poem's completion, hoping this step-by-step modeling of creating lists and making connections would encourage the students to use the process to create their own poems. One temptation in writing a two-voice poem is to write it start to finish, like a conversation, but we have found that this step-by-step approach to the creation of a two-voice poem results in greater realization of the possibilities of the form. Some students also used Venn diagrams as a graphic organizer to think about connections, oppositions, and overlaps. Students were allowed to write these poems in pairs. We challenged them to make their lists specific and descriptive, and to show their understanding of the historical content through the poem.

Untitled

by Marcus and Kyle

I am a rabbi	I am Hitler
I am the leader of a synagogue	I am the leader of the Nazis.
The Star of David is my honor.	The Swastika is my honor.

I don't want the Jewish community to
Leave the synagogue

I want the Jewish community
To leave the synagogue.

I am brave

I am vicious

I have fear in my eyes

I am determined to kill the Jews.

I am the commander of the boots.

Sharing and Performing Poetry

A natural evolution of the two-voice poem is performance. Before we had planned formal performances of these poems, the students were already rehearsing the inflections, movements, and other details of presentation that are implicit in this form. Taking our cue from the students, we planned to finish the unit with a poetry reading.

The excitement in the classroom increased dramatically. Over the next two days, students revised poems, developed performances, and reflected on their work in a new way. Students discussed the layers of meaning in their poems and how best to communicate those to an audience. For many, it involved hand or full-body motions. In several instances, the poems became a drama of sorts, complete with entrances and exits. There were other pairs who simply stood and read, letting the words of their poem speak without embellishment.

The atmosphere was charged as the students shared their work. Virtually every pair of students read their two-voice poem, and many read other favorite selections. The reading was both emotional and joyful. These students had evolved a great deal as poets, and their confidence in sharing their work with fellow students is a testament to the respect they had for each other and the work they created. In the words of Filbrandt (1999), "transformation was occurring; we had built a caring community for most of the students in the classroom. They were respectful of one another, they were comfortable . . . and they could express themselves" (p. 15).

Students were also asked to select from among their own poems those that best represented their learning of both social studies content and poetry

SIDE TRIP: POETIC FORMS AS SCAFFOLDING FOR CREATIVE WRITERS

Poetic forms like list poems and two-voice poems can provide scaffolding for budding creative writers. Such poetic forms give student writers a structure and free them to concentrate on the metaphorical and creative thinking that builds the imagery of their poems.

To extend the possibilities explored in this article, try a craft minilesson on additional poetic forms. Students will not only learn new forms, but will also rethink the images and stories that they share to fit the additional forms.

After conducting research on dictators and writing list poems, introduce acrostic poems—poems that use the letters in a word to begin each line of the poem—with the ReadWriteThink interactive (<http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/acrostic/>). The online tool explains the poetic form and then prompts students to brainstorm, write, and revise their poems. Students might focus on the names of the dictators whom they research or any of the words that they have included in their word lists.

For another option, students can write diamante poems after exploring two somewhat opposite perspectives in their two-voice poems. A diamante poem is a diamond-shaped poem that uses nouns, adjectives, and gerunds to describe either one central topic or two opposing topics. The ReadWriteThink interactive Diamante Poem (<http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/diamante/>) includes examples and definitions of parts of speech. Demonstrate and explore the poetic form with the tool, and then have students use the interactive to write and revise their poems.

Model poems can also provide scaffolding and inspire student writers. The process is very simple: share a poem with students and then invite them to write their own poems using the basic structure and words from the original. After completing the various World War II poems included in this article, for instance, you might ask students to write original poems following the structure of “I Hear America Singing” by Walt Whitman. With their knowledge of Holocaust victims and survivors, Hitler Youth, dictators, and others, students can write “I Hear Germany Singing” poems individually or in small groups. The ReadWriteThink lesson “Walt Whitman as a Model Poet: ‘I Hear My School Singing’” demonstrates a similar activity. You can visit the lesson online at http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=989.

—Traci Gardner
www.readwritethink.org

writing at the completion of the unit. These poems were assessed on the depth and accuracy of their social studies content and the use of poetry strategies. In addition, students were assessed throughout the unit on their participation in poetry workshop and other activities. At the close of the unit, the poems selected by students for assessment were compiled into a class anthology.

Conclusion

Since the unit’s completion, we have reflected on our work and its effectiveness. Our approach, fo-

cus on several different poetic techniques, worked well. With students who have not had a lot of experience writing poetry, this whirlwind approach provides numerous tools in a short period of time. We found that the variety and flexibility enabled every student to find success. Though students had difficulty at times just “free writing,” they could always try making a list or start by asking questions. If we looked at a specific type of poem in class on a certain day, we asked that everyone try writing that kind of poem at least once. After reasonable effort, they could

work on something they had already written or start something new. At such an early level of experience with poetry, we found that flexibility is critical to building student skills and confidence.

There were two benefits to this unit that bear special mention. First, diverse groups of students were able to find success through poetry. Agnes, who wrote the poem “Nazi Salute” included earlier, is an English language learner. The untitled two-voice poem was collaboratively written by Marcus, who often had difficulties writing, and a partner. Many times, when given the choice, these students will now write a poem during writing workshop instead of a prose piece. While this is true of many students in the class, we were especially pleased to observe that even students with special interests or learning challenges found the use of poetry accessible and, in many cases, meaningful.

The second benefit was how effectively poetry served the students as they engaged with difficult material. Many of the topics surrounding World War II are as much about emotional understandings as factual knowledge. Through poetry, students confronted many of the issues of this period. Their understanding of the tensions and fear in the society is evident. We believe students gained empathy through this study. They reached beyond the facts on the pages of a textbook, into deeper connections and the emotions of a difficult time in history.

As tentative as we were at the outset of this unit, we are now convinced that poetry can engage, inspire, and teach students. We have seen firsthand that every student is a poet and that poetry is effective for teaching content knowledge. We have witnessed the power of poetry and its impact on students as writers and thinkers. It transformed this class into a community of poets.

Poetry continues to play a role in this classroom. The class reads and writes poetry for pur-

poses stretching across the curriculum, and “just because.” Poetry covers walls, fills desks, and brims the bookshelves of the classroom library. Students continue their exploration of poetry, reading and writing in the genre during literacy blocks and throughout the content areas. This unit has opened the poetic world, showing students that poetry can be an expression of history, hate, anger, understanding, and any number of other concepts and emotions. These students have earned a comfort level with poetry that we hope will serve as a foundation for their future ventures in poetic risk taking. Perhaps this is due to the poetry toolboxes that the students developed over the course of this study, or simply the power poetry creates if given the opportunity.

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