

# The Use of Poetry in Developing Language Skills

## in Freshman Composition

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I began realizing, toward the seventh or eighth week of my first semester teaching Freshman Composition, that I was learning more about my students' personalities from their papers than from their participation in class. I was fascinated by their writing, especially when they wrote informally, or on a subject that impelled them to write passionately. And some of the students did write passionately, although their passion was evidenced more in the fury of their attack on the blank page than in the lucidity of their prose. I received the following note appended to a revised essay from one frustrated feminist.

Mr. Brady:

You said you were confused about whether the cause in this essay was woman's lib or the vitality of the life force. I just want to say that woman's lib is the cause, and that it is a vital force.

I'm not sure if she meant that women's liberation is the cause in a cause and effect essay or in a life and death struggle. But either way this response is indicative of a problem faced by my entire class: their ideas were being misunderstood or ignored; and

since they lacked the vocabulary to express sophisticated ideas, or even to clearly define ideas for themselves, they were reluctant to write watered-down, simplistic versions of their thought. The blank page was uncompromising; and the red pen, I'm sure they felt at times, was nothing short of vindictive. Their difficulty was not primarily organizational; it was a problem of definition. Ideas that were vaguely bantering about, trying to squeeze the last bit of meaning from an elementary vocabulary, could hardly lend themselves to sophisticated or efficient organization.

The students needed to broaden their vocabulary, and thereby relieve the undue weight of meaning placed on their tired stock of words. Recurring words like "develop," "represent," "definitely," "basically," "really," and "a lot," screamed the frustration of students whose ideas were confined not by sloppiness of thought but by muted language skills.

I felt that within the structure of a fourteen-week semester, it would be impossible and pointless to attempt to pump words into students' anemic vocabulary. What they needed was not more words, which in their clumsiness they would by half know and misuse, but an insight, a new sensitivity, into language itself. Once gained, this sensitivity would allow students to increase vocabulary naturally, through their daily experience with language.

Increasing sensitivity to language is a rather ambitious project for one semester, and it smacks of the vagueness that marred my students' writing. I needed a model, something that would give me a handle on a problem that is at the very center of the writer's experience: the problem of the word. I found my model in poetry.

Poetry, being language at its most refined, seemed perfectly adapted to a close scrutiny of the word. Since it contained fewer words than most prose models, the short poem had to rely more heavily on the power of each of its words. The class could see, in a clear and detailed way, how words were chosen, how sentences were pared of "dead wood" words, how, by the sharpness of its language, the poem became more than the sum of its words.

I began by introducing Archibald MacLeish's poem "Ars Poetica," along with a short guideline on what I expected the class to gain from reading poetry. I had expected that the students would need to be led through the poem, that their experience with poetry was negligible or unpleasant, and that they would be unsure of the purpose of studying poetry in a critical writing course; but I was unprepared for the awe caused by the simple act of distributing a mimeo. I was naive. The students did not resent the poem or my attempts to prod them into discussing, but neither did they venture to comment. They were "palpable and mute/as a globed fruit."

After some simplistic explication, the students were better able to deal with the poem and were less intimidated by what they felt was its needless obscurity. But, nevertheless, I knew that it would be impossible to use poetry to illuminate prose since poetry offered more linguistic difficulties than did prose to students who had "had enough of poetry in high school." Part of the problem was their tendency to regurgitate the meaningless generalities about poetry they had heard in high school. Their misunderstanding of, and previous failure at dealing with, poetry caused students to suspect the value of poetry,

of translation. The poems were short (the most successful had fifteen words), gritty, and humorous. They were fun.

I simplified matters further by using each poem to illustrate only one specific device or idea. We did not analyze each poem as a work of art, but only as an example of imagery, or precision, or rhythm, etc. The students gained confidence in their ability to identify and understand the tools of poetry as each device was pointed out and discussed. Throughout the experiment I used a lecture/discussion format, and as the project wore on I found myself lecturing less and listening more; though admittedly even toward the end the class knew many moments of silence.

Each class period was supplemented by a homework assignment. Since I wasn't able to talk much about prose in class, and I worried about the transition from poetry to prose, most of the assignments were designed to make students use the crafts of poetry they had discussed in class in short prose essays. I asked them after the first period to discuss how, according to MacLeish, poetry differed from their own idea of prose. How could poetry not mean, but be? How could prose be palpable, if not mute? How would MacLeish feel about writing a classification essay?

Each succeeding assignment was meant to increase the students' awareness of the relationship between poetry and prose. Students paraphrased a poem in prose and explained how their rendition differed from the original. They wrote images, in prose or poetry, of their own design in imitation of Richard Wilbur's "Stop." They discussed rhythm and rhyme in poetry and prose.

As we made our way through the poetry, as I was forced to "cast a cold eye" on my ideas about poetry and on my method of presenting it to the class, I began drawing up another guideline for reading poetry. In this handout I emphasized the precision of language required in good poetry, and its appeal to the total being rather than to the intellect. Obviously, in four pages I could only sketch a few important aspects of the poetic art; I did not intend the handout to be a final statement on poetry, and I told the class so.

As much as I would like to prevaricate, there seems no way to avoid coming to a conclusion about the value of my experiment. I have no statistics; my only feedback was homework assignments and class participation. Even these provide only an imperfect yard stick in judging the project's value, since I was merely planting a seed, hoping to break rigid prejudices against poetry and brittle concepts of language. I was asking questions rather than doling out answers. Burdened with a new sensitivity, students could not be expected to respond briskly. It is even possible that their writing skills would falter under the weight of cumbersome knowledge. But I believe that if they continue working on language skills, this project will have proved a valuable beginning.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Four Forms of Metaphor," CE, 33 (1970), 125-38.

and especially to suspect interpretation of poetry. They felt, in the words of one student, "what is, is. You can find a hundred meanings for the word 'the' if you look hard enough." For these students, analysis was "reading into."

This skepticism, this unwillingness to explore the complexity and power of the word, was at the center of the students' language problem. Since they felt that each word had one or two self-evident meanings, they were deliberately blind to the shades of meaning, the sounds, and the rhythm of words. They preferred a simple, scientific language where there was a one-to-one correspondence between word and meaning. Where English did not fit their Procrustean bed, they casually chopped it or neatly stretched it out.

If I could break their grip on the key words which allowed them to handle language like a simple wrench, even if I could not carry them to a new understanding of language, I felt I would be successful. This may sound like a negative approach, but since the need for language is ever-present, if students were made to believe that language is more than a mathematical equation, more than a simple wrench, even if they are not sure what it is, they will be more open to their language experience.

I set out to study four aspects of the word: connotation, precision, figurative language, and sound. I would devote a class period to each category, and I would use simple, interesting poems to illustrate the lessons. I decided not to use segments of poems, or diagrams, or to overload the students with terminology, since I felt these methods would remove the students from the experience of the poem, and would increase their antipathy toward poetry and language. It was important that the lessons be fun. This was the first poetry some students would see; if they did not enjoy it, it would be the last. This course in composition was not self-contained; it would be useless if it did not whet their appetite for poetry.

The success of this experiment would rest on the choice of poems. I needed poetry that was not infected with complex literary devices, poetry that was not long or abstract, poetry that was fun. I went to several composition books to see what teachers of freshman writing thought appropriate for their students. Teachers of freshman writing are ambitious. I found these books crammed with poems by the great masters, some very difficult poems, and a few light ones. I went to articles on methodology. Methodologists are ambitious. Laurence Perrine, in his article on figurative language, advised teachers to divide metaphor into four categories.<sup>1</sup> This would have been a neat trick--I could have devoted about ten minutes to each category of metaphor.

I chose several poems from various general anthologies, but still I was anxious. Much of my confidence had been shattered by the "battle of 'Ars Poetica.'" If I were to take the field again, I wanted a sharp sword and a steel-rimmed chariot. I found my battle armor in a least likely corner: ancient poetry. The ancient Irish poetry that I knew was simple, imagistic, free of cumbersome devices, and dense. Since it was translated, it had been sifted twice: once by the poet's imagination and once by the discipline