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Transforming Text: Finding the Poem Within

Cover Page Footnote

Deborah F. Carrington is Associate Professor of Education at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, VA. She teaches courses in creativity and arts in education and other teacher preparation courses. Her current research focuses on supporting creativity in the classroom. Chapman Hood Frazier is Professor of Education at James Madison University. A published poet, he is currently working on a book of interviews called *Conversations with Contemporary Poets*. His interview with Gregory Orr appears in a forthcoming issue of *Writer's Chronicle*.

Transforming Text: Finding the Poem Within

Deborah F. Carrington & Chapman Hood Frazier*

“I hate poetry. It is confusing and I despise analyzing what a poem means. I don’t have any idea how I’ll ever teach it to a group of students.” Dustin, one of our pre-service teachers, expressed what many future teachers felt. When we mentioned poetry, many groaned. They had bad memories about how they learned poetry. They only recalled memorizing a list of poetic terms in elementary and middle school, analyzing poetry in high school and college, being tested on what the poet meant in English classes and on standardized tests. Often a class devoted to poetry is a discussion in which the teacher asks all the questions and eventually gives the answers. No wonder many teachers prefer teaching prose over poetry. They do not understand what Frances Kazemek and Pat Rigg advocate in *Enriching Our Lives*: “Poetry helps us understand ourselves and our world; it helps us see. . . in new ways. At the same time, poetry lifts our language. We find ourselves using language in new ways, in ways that are more vivid, more powerful, and more fun” (28).

We change teachers’ discomfort by moving from prose to poetry through a creative process that encourages students to read closely, read well, follow their personal thoughts and associations. It is imperative to provide creative, engaging activities for pre-service teachers, so they experience the power of imagination in a way that they can take to their students. We want our pre-service, pre-K to 12 language arts teachers to begin with language that is “safe” and explore its possibilities by making the words their own. By doing so, they begin to understand the power of language that Kazemek and Rigg mention.

By creating this link between prose and poetry, the process of working with a poem is demystified. Pre-service teachers find an opportunity to play with language and explore nuance. This approach incorporates what Louise Rosenblatt terms “aesthetic reading” or the “aesthetic stance,” which is a type of reading that encourages readers to read for pleasure. The reader and text act and are acted upon in a reciprocal process of meaning-making.

The purpose of this strategy, then, is to encourage students to work creatively with a page of prose text by transforming it into a poem. This shift in genre from what is a narrative or expository text to a poetic one illustrates how the seeds of one discourse may, in fact, be found in another. We find that pre-service teachers need to experience playing with text to understand the transformative heart of the poetic process. They learn the value of personal creativity and are better able to nurture it in students. Paul Torrance captures the transformation process in his 1992 definition of creativity: “Creativity is digging deeper. Creativity is looking twice. Creativity is crossing out mistakes” (5). Often, pre-service teachers use this poetic approach when designing their content units and find ways for students to transform informational texts, like content area textbooks, into an aesthetic expression.

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Selecting Text

The process is simple. First, we ask students to choose a key page of text from a selection of prose which they can relate to. Recently, as part of a presentation for teachers, we took single pages from a range of personal narratives, from Nikki Giovanni's *Grandfathers* to Sandra Cisenros' *A House on Mango Street* and asked them to select a page that spoke to them.

We often begin a session by having students discuss what texts are significant in their lives and why. In our Young Adult Literature class, for instance, we ask students to select a page from a novel they have read and found to be personally significant. When we worked with marketing students who were working on a campaign ad, they found a key page from a magazine to which they could relate. Having a choice is one of the cornerstones of the process since it creates an opportunity for ownership and is at the heart of the poetic process. Yet, since the words are not their own, the words can be moved, deleted, or highlighted without the gnawing sense the writer feels when she must sacrifice words for the good of the poem.

In keeping with reader response theory, we encourage students to respond aesthetically to the text and discover subtexts hidden within. *Knowledge-based reading processes* occur when a reader brings previous experience to the text to interpret it (Roe and Smith, 2005). Examples in this article demonstrate pre-service teachers' responses to the novel, *Speak*.

Yet there are other ways of applying the process. One middle school teacher suggested he would use the strategy when he taught *Beowulf*, to have students select a page that revealed something about a key character. Another teacher suggested having students all use the same page from a text to illustrate how the author creates "tone" or "mood" through his word choice.

The next step is for students to select what they consider the most important page from a reading. It might be a page that embodies a key theme from the story, or a page that has a character description they find appealing.

In the example below (Figure 1), a pre-service teacher chose a page from *Speak*. Wheel-chair bound because of an automobile accident that left her paralyzed from the waist down, she selected a page that revealed her feelings about her condition. Not only her image impresses, but the turn in the text itself from the initial phrase, "You are not good enough" to the illuminated, "Nothing is perfect, flaws are interesting."

These page selections often provide the backdrop for a powerful product, one that works both autobiographically as well as in response to the novel. With some students, we have experimented by having them select a page from the dictionary or a textbook that contains information they believe is important. But over the years, our favorite assignment is to begin the process by having them find a page that reveals something about who they are.

For an initial workshop, if time is short, we prepare photocopied pages from a variety of sources and ask participants to select a page that "speaks" to them in some way. By doing so, we still are encouraging the same close reading that this activity demands and promoting the close relationship with the text, a skill that is invaluable for the reader.

The activity, then, may have a variety of applications beyond the creation of a poem. If used as a pre-reading activity, students would be given a page of text from a story or

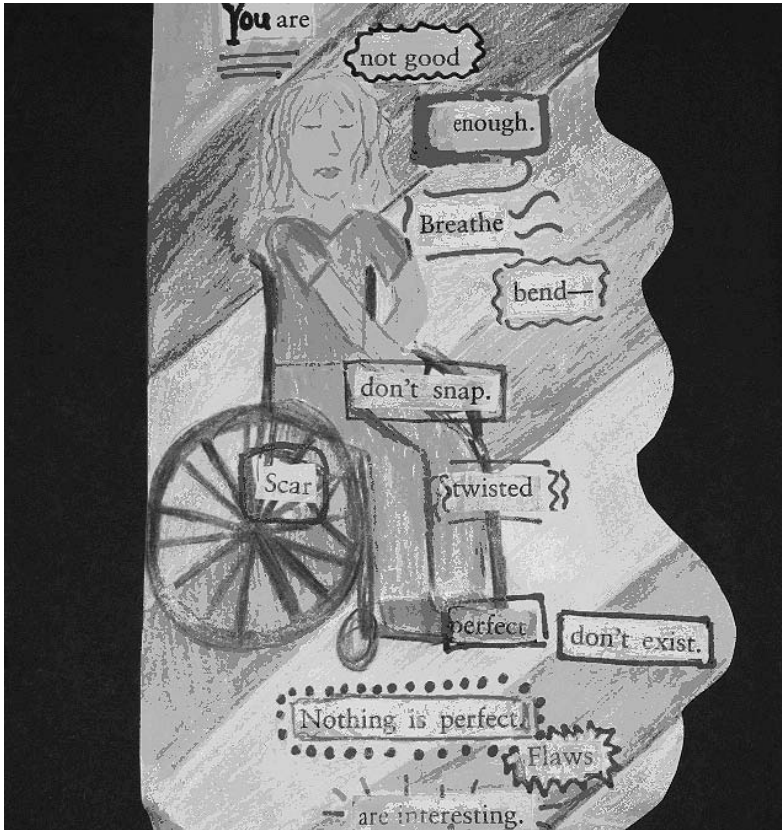


Figure 1: Personally illuminating a text

expository text they will be asked to read. By transforming the text, the students are able to explore their own response in a new and unusual way before reading the entire novel as a way to examine their own responses. We have used this process when pre-service teachers are writing their philosophies of education. We ask them to select a page of text from a primary source they relate to and bring it into class. Then, we ask them to complete the re-envisioning of text process with their page selection so their core beliefs surrounding teaching and learning emerge by using a combination of words and images.

Jeff Wilhelm discusses how an important part of the reading process is “front-loading,” or:

activating or building of background knowledge necessary to approach a particular text [including] the introduction of conceptual, procedural, or genre knowledge, i.e., knowledge about the content of a piece, about the strategies necessary to reading it, or about the text structure and the demands it places on the reader. (45)

This procedure, then, is one method that encourages the students to imaginatively approach a reading selection by encouraging them to intimately connect with a text. It could also

be used as a post-reading activity to amplify a feeling or connection that the student has to an author's text similar to what the student did in the example above. Possible themes for transformation are autobiography, culture or family tradition, key theme exploration, central conflict investigation, character development, or tone exploration.

Re-Seeing the Text

Once the students have selected a page, we photocopy it into either sixteen point font size or larger. It is important that students have a full page of text to work with, since it will allow them more flexibility with the artistic execution of the project.

Next, we present an overview of the process and show examples. One of the first examples we use that captures the re-envisioning of text and illustrates the kind of product we want the students or pre-service teachers to create is from Tom Phillips' novel, *The Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*. Phillips has essentially transformed each page of the text into a visually new artistic product, one that actually creates a unique reading of the novel that is totally different from the original text. He explains his process on the book jacket:

I took a forgotten Victorian novel found by chance. I plundered, mined, and undermined its text to make it yield the ghosts of other possible stories, scenes, poems, erotic incidents and surrealist catastrophes which seemed to lurk within its wall of words. As I worked on it, I replaced the text I'd stripped away with visual images of all kinds. It began to tell and depict, amongst other memories, dreams and reflections, the sad story of Bill Toge, one of love's casualties. (1997)

Sometimes, we will read the above passage to the pre-service teachers, or we will explain what he did and show them selected pages from the text to illustrate the variety of methods he used transform the novel. Immediately, the participants grasp the concrete nature of the process and are excited about the possibility of working both with words and with visual art. We explain the purpose of the assignment, "to use the page to show something about who you are," and often show other examples that previous students have created. We place these examples in front of the room so the participants can come up and look more closely at how previous students have worked with the texts. Figure 2, below, completed by a graduate student in the English Education program, illustrates her revision of a page from *Speak* and illustrates her own internal conflict between home and school.

Now students are ready to reconstruct their page of text and need a variety of art media to highlight particular words or phrases. They can do this in a number of ways: by cutting out words with scissors or a craft knife, underlining or circling, coloring key phrases or words, painting over phrases with translucent colors. This stage is usually a thoughtful time as students consider the flow of meanings and the visual arrangement of text. Consequently, we often provide each student with at least a 9 x 12 inch piece of Bristol board or other sturdy paper to be used as a canvas or back drop for their visual representations.

As for the art media, simple, affordable and readily accessible materials work best: markers of all sizes and colors, crayons, colored pencils, ballpoint pens, oil pastels,

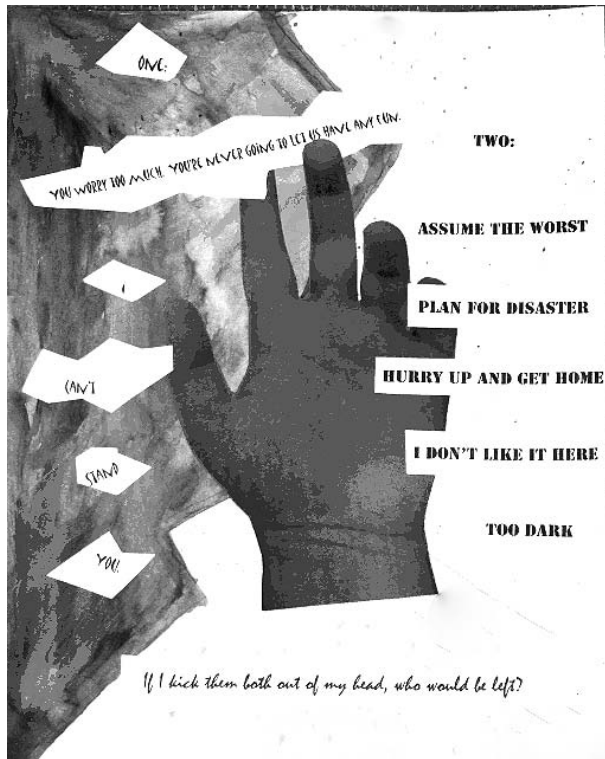


Figure 2: Depicting conflict

watercolor crayons and pencils, and watercolors. In addition, students can use basic office materials: correction fluid, rubber cement, glue sticks, tape, florescent highlighters, colored glue, and even a hole punch. At workshops, teachers have told us over and again that affordability and accessibility of resources are key issues in whether or not an activity is implemented.

Often during this workshop stage, we play instrumental music in the background to set a tone conducive to reflection. Former students and workshop attendees have said they like the music, and it doesn't get in the way of their reflection. With a laptop computer and Internet connectivity, a wide array of musical genres are available through Pandora.com, another free resource that students and teachers are glad to discover. The point is to create an atmosphere that encourages students to read closely to discern the significance of the words in front of them, and then to capture that meaning with recombined words and images.

Sharing the Text

One of the many strengths of this process is that the students do not sit back and passively experience a finished product; instead, they are engaged in transforming their text into a different genre that combines written and oral language as well as elements of the visual arts. "Understanding different genres assists readers in the recognition of text

structure and story elements” (Roe and Smith 244). Their ideas, images, and feelings are part of the process and constitute an aesthetic response to text, so it is important for everyone to share their work.

During sharing, students act out pieces individually or as a group recite their poems chorally. At the National Association of Multicultural Education Conference, one teacher who has worked closely with Native American students sang his poem to the group and commented on how many of his students really prefer to sing rather than just read. More often, however, students read their individual poems aloud to their classmates either to the whole class, or if they are reluctant to do so, we ask them to share in small groups. Inevitably, after doing so, students will volunteer certain poems to be read to the whole class because they are so good. Last year during our workshop at the Virginia Association of Teachers of English Conference, one teacher had selected a page from the Giovanni text and created a wonderful poem that she read to the group that revealed her own troubled relationship with her grandfather. It was a powerful experience for everyone. As Elliot Eisner observes: “Since the arts are open-ended and generate individual responses with no single right answer, they encourage participation and interaction. Everyone can contribute and discover a voice or medium for their thoughts, reactions, and ideas” (592).

Another strength of this activity is the support it offers to reluctant poets. It acts as a “literacy scaffold,” which is a kind of formula for writing a poem (Cecil and Lauritzen 67). Through the transformation of text, the student understands how the lyric genre functions both through their selection of key words and how they relate to each other—again, an aspect that Wilhelm refers to as “frontloading” (Wilhelm, Baker and Dube 48). In addition, the process of re-envisioning text helps pre-service teachers experience an immediate success in their first attempt at poetry writing.

This success can then motivate students to explore more complex and involved word play in the future. Likewise, students feel confident about the resulting visual created by the highlighted text and use of art media. The finished mixed-media piece is a blend of the poetic and the graphic and draws on both linguistic and visual symbol systems to convey a message. By thinking of a text in this way, we call into question the notion that it is only a linguistic production. Rather, by focusing on text as aesthetic experience, the creator brings forth a multifaceted result that merges the visual, the auditory, and the kinesthetic—elements that shape content to create meaning.

The example on the following page, Figure 3, (also from *Speak*), shows another response to the novel, one that captures the tone of it as well as the theme of repression.

Conclusion

Though we originally developed this activity with “at-risk,” reluctant secondary English students, we have explored its possibilities and adapted it for intermediate and upper elementary classrooms through workshops with students and their teachers. In addition, we have presented it to college creative writing classes, PreK-6 language arts methods classes, and even a marketing class in the business department of our university. We have found it to be engaging for graduate and adult students as well as for teachers from a variety of content areas. Each time we share the process with teachers, they have found a variety of ways to adapt it to their individual classrooms. One middle school teacher discussed how he planned to use it as a way to explore a key character, attributes, or to

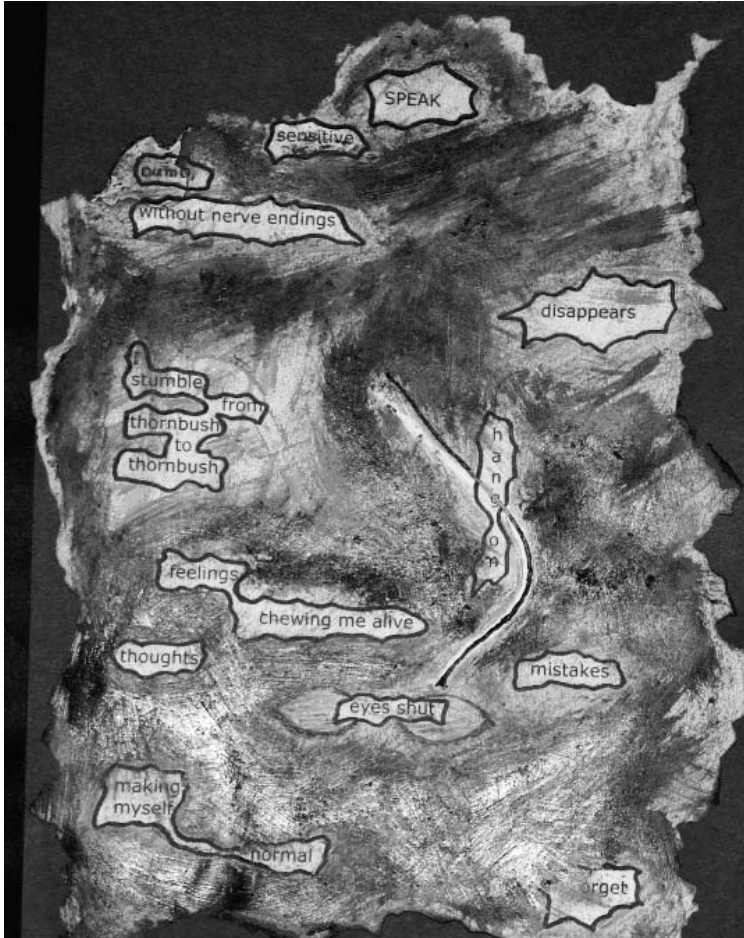


Figure 3: Capturing tone and theme

identify words and phrases that contribute to the theme of a story.

Several years ago, we presented it at the National Association of Multicultural Education as a strategy to explore the connection between literacy, text and culture. Participating teachers were guided to respond to the text through their unique cultural lenses, capturing aspects of their cultural identity in the process. In each case, this strategy has proven to be an effective method for encouraging the participants to work poetically and creatively with a text and to realize that doing so can be revealing and meaningful. With pre-service teachers, we want them to experience the excitement of shaping a written text that reflects something about who they are as well as understanding the value of a visual rendering of the text material. All of the six English language arts—reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and visual representation—are strengthened by such an engagement (Tompkins 8). Equally important, an opportunity to be creative with

text becomes possible for both teachers and students. This interplay of textual and visual elements allows for unexpected combinations and revelations.

As teachers ourselves, we demonstrate what Eisner refers to as “the relationship between cognition and representation . . . that multiple forms of representation cultivate different aspects of cognition” (353). All teachers need practice in how to flexibly generate different representational forms both within a single discipline and across disciplines in order to model that process for their students. Participating in aesthetic experiences like this one allows participants to feel their way through the ambiguity and chaos that is part of the creative process. The willingness to play, to generate, to make mistakes even, is a hallmark of creative teaching and learning (Torrance 8).

It is our belief that more engagement with the creative process will help teachers become more confident and more likely to structure creative opportunities for their students. When teachers experience the value of aesthetic involvement with text, and specifically poetry, they are more likely to include such interactions in their future instruction. And in this world of high stakes testing when creativity is often down-played, when the prescribed over-shadows the open-ended, teachers more than ever need to find original methods that encourage students to engage the material, and thus, themselves and the world. As author and researcher, Linda Reif reminds us in her luncheon conversation with the great art educator, Elliot Eisner, education is about the construction of meaning. Involvement in the arts:

. . . awakens our sensibilities to things that often pass us by. . . the outcome of a work of art is a surprise to the maker, and in the surprise the work of art remakes the maker. The great function of art is not only to provide another world for others, but to redefine ourselves because we are in the process of entering possibilities, entering worlds, finding things that we didn't know were there when we started. (xii)

The outward journey of re-envisioning text to find the poem within leads the reader to a new inner place that explores connections with the text, self, and world. Ultimately, the treasure to be found is in the heart of the poem.



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