

## The Power of the Poetic Lens: Why Teachers Need to Read Poems Together

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*For it is important that awake people be awake,  
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;  
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—  
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.*

From “A Ritual to Read to Each Other,”  
William Stafford

After twenty years of teaching, I cried in the classroom. My students, a group of teachers in training, watched as I opened the most treasured gift I have received in my teaching career. They had decorated a simple black binder and thoughtfully assembled individually selected poems for my birthday. I thumbed through page after page of poetry and song lyrics, savoring the words that inspired them, including: “Hope is the Thing with Feathers” by Emily Dickinson, “Dreams” by Langston Hughes, “What Teachers Make” by Taylor Mali, “Invitation” by Shel Silverstein, and “Same Love” by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis—and I let the tears flow.

When I think back to that moment I still feel tender and profoundly grateful. For me, poetry has often served as a sort of spiritual balm, countering the incessant pace of life, which sometimes leaves me feeling shadowed by an inexplicable sense of loneliness—and disconnection from self. Perhaps Robert Frost captures a bit of the healing resonance I felt when I received that 8 1/2 x 11 binder:

A poem begins with a lump in the throat, a home-sickness or a love-sickness. It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where the emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words. (Frost and Untermeyer 220)

My students and I find and share the words Frost describes in a weekly reading ritual that I call “Monday Morning Musings,” and the poetry collection I received celebrates and honors that experience.

During Monday Morning Musings (MMM) a group of teacher candidates, often bleary-eyed with hot coffee in hand, meets with me for 15-20 minutes before official class time. We gather together, voluntarily, to read poems by favorite authors. Our process is simple—we don’t talk about the poems; we just sit in a circle, listen, and snap our fingers at the end of each reading. I have been surprised by students’ interest and devotion to this brief weekly encounter. Here are some of the things they say about it:

- Coming to MMM settles me into my day as those images and rhythms drift down out of the air. I feel we’re all threaded together for those quiet minutes.
- I enjoyed having a place to voice some of the things that are more meaningful to me—not just my thoughts on teaching, politics, etc.

- I am drawn to poetry because it creates a place to wrestle with and consider things in life that really matter.

Apart from the immediate benefits cited above, participants from my former reading group (who are now elementary and high school teachers) continue to teach, write and even publish their own poems. Some structure daily or weekly readings in their classrooms along with the occasional poetry slam while others participate and regularly attend their own slams outside of class. As a direct result of Monday Morning Musings, a handful of my students, a faculty colleague, and I have even presented at national conferences with the goal of sharing what inspires us most about poetry and how we bring it into our classrooms.

### **Arts Education and the Standards Movement: Is There Still Room for Poetry in Today's Schools?**

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and related high-stakes testing legislation continue to narrow the K-12 curriculum in favor of a more efficient, systematic approach to learning in both content and process. As a result, educators at all levels appear to be working in increasingly frantic contexts to produce acceptable test scores more than informed and reflective student citizens. Frederick Hess and Michael Petrilli claim that NCLB sets “a new precedent of federal involvement in curriculum and instruction” (94). With teachers and administrators driven to produce and report evidence of “adequate yearly progress” within an increasingly mechanized educational system, is there still room in the curriculum room for reflection, creativity, and the arts?

Despite the persistent call for accountability, federal legislators have not eschewed arts education. In 2008, Barack Obama's Arts Policy Campaign platform argued for a reinvestment in arts education and creativity. As a result, the President's Committee on Arts and Humanities (PCAH) conducted an in-depth review of challenges and opportunities in arts education. The review includes two seminal longitudinal studies, current brain research, and numerous arts integration cases studies. Schools in the toughest neighborhoods (e.g., Chicago and the DC-area suburbs) are increasing students' test scores and preparing graduates who are competitive in the work force. The summary states: “The value of arts education is often phrased in enrichment terms”; but as PCAH saw, “it is also an effective tool in school-wide reform and fixing some of our biggest educational challenges. It is not a flower, but a wrench” (1).

Indifferent administrators or teachers need to be reminded of these success stories. Edutopia's Mariko Nobori tells the story of an Annapolis, Maryland middle school that began fully incorporating an arts-based curriculum in 2009. Since then, Wiley H. Bates Middle School has seen significant shifts in both school-wide academic performance and behavior. Arts-based lessons and activities, in this case, don't serve as add-on projects; instead, they become the teaching tools for addressing the core academic standards and curricula while motivating and engaging students.

Poetry, as one art form, can also be used as a teaching tool for enhancing numerous skills and dispositions, including detailed observation skills, reflective thinking, creativity, inferential thinking, and higher-level cognitive skills such as analysis, evaluation and

synthesis. Poet and writer Georgia Heard argues for the value of poetry in the K-12 curriculum by practically aligning instructional activities with a variety of core standards. My own research with poetry outlines a “think and feel aloud” study conducted with 11<sup>th</sup> graders, where accessing and identifying comprehension processes outside of the traditional realm of literary analysis enhanced students’ ability to read, write about, and discuss poems while simultaneously increasing their reported interest in reading. Based on my findings, I argue that poetry lends itself to more expansive approaches to comprehension (and cognition) such as visualizing, using the senses, drawing on personal experiences, and identifying with a poem’s speaker. Some of these skills aren’t explicitly addressed in the Common Core Standards, yet they become comprehension tools for effectively meeting those standards. They also link to social and emotional competencies, which may be crucial to supporting and motivating students in their learning.

Evidence indicates that poetry, too, can serve as a “wrench” in leveraging students’ learning (e.g., Eva 51). However, this essay ultimately seeks to explore the ways in which poetry supports and sustains *educators* in their own professional growth—perhaps a less quantifiable phenomenon. In what ways can teachers benefit from reading and responding to poems together? Do reading rituals like Monday Morning Musings effectively serve as a social adhesive? Are they incubators for new ideas? And, how might poetry itself allow for the focusing calm, careful reflection, and open-mindedness that are necessary for meaningful teaching and learning?

### **Why Poetry for Teachers?**

When I began my work as a teacher educator at Seattle University eight years ago, I came to the job as a former high school language arts teacher and college writing instructor. My desire to share poetry with teacher candidates stemmed from the mild heartache I experienced in shifting my instructional focus from literature to lesson planning. Furthermore, I selfishly craved the benefits of the regular Monday morning soul boost that occurred as we lapped up the images and sounds of loved poems together. It was a chance to stop, pause, and connect within a fast-paced, intensive master’s program for K-12 teacher candidates. During this weekly pause, my students and I became complicit in discovering (and rediscovering) language that contained a spark of our humanity. Denise Levertov alludes to this phenomenon in the opening stanza of “The Secret”: “Two girls discover/ the secret of life/ in a sudden line/ of poetry.” Of course, the poems themselves held a lot of magic for us, but the fact that we witnessed and celebrated their “secrets” in community has perhaps been the most powerful element of the ritual.

I believe that poetry reading can foster a sense of belonging and connectedness among teachers. This personal bias, and perhaps the real inspiration behind my Monday Morning Musings group, stems from my interaction with the Center for Courage and Renewal. The Center, inspired by the works and philosophy of Parker Palmer, provides a range of programs and retreats designed to provide a nurturing environment for exploring the relationship between one’s vocation and inner life. Having attended a series of retreats during my graduate school years, I read and savored many different poems with other teacher-leaders. Retreat facilitators used art, music, and poetry, in particular, to invite reflection and discussion around the seemingly private issues of identity, integrity, and

authentic leadership. I find it rare in a university setting, to have tough, vulnerable conversations with my colleagues about issues as profound as purpose and role, politics, and social justice, to name a few. Yet Parker Palmer wisely points to the role of poetry as a potential tool for bringing groups of teachers together in community. Poems and other art forms serve as vehicles, prisms, or alternative voices, which are not as threatening as self-disclosure. Palmer claims: “We use these third things, these texts, because they allow us to follow Emily Dickinson’s wonderful dictum: “Tell the truth, but tell it slant” (*Hidden Wholeness* 92).

Good poetry, when read aloud in a group, opens up a participatory space among its readers while offering up reality in kind and palatable doses. And when poetry expresses something seemingly inexplicable, the shared recognition of that truth can create human resonance—a sense of common experience. This subtle appreciation of connectedness can go so much farther in healing than many other more structured and direct approaches to “community building” in our institutions. Art gives us the excuse to talk about the real stuff of life with our students and colleagues, and poems can be tools for bringing groups of teachers together in community.

Sanders and Bennett discuss the importance of creative community literacy, in a broader sense, by describing their “Community Writer’s Workshop” participants as non-student residents or “students of life” who focus on “collaborating, fostering the creative process, and careful listening” during free sessions at their university writing center (74). In their conclusion, the authors cite Cain’s belief that with poetry, “We can make room for other voices, other forms of expression and other viewpoints that the academic classroom might otherwise seem to disallow” (240). I believe that we must venture beyond traditional academic discourse into more creative, collaborative contexts in order to sustain our work and our identities as teachers.

### **The Power of Group Literacy Experiences: Not Just for Students?**

Classic research in language arts suggests that the most meaningful literacy experiences for our students seem to occur in groups: book clubs, literature circles, writing groups, and workshops. Describing learning as social and inter-textual process, Kathy Short studied how collaboration among young readers influenced their responses to texts. Her seminal 1986 work informs current understandings of the fundamental components of literature circles such as choice, collaboration and development of thinking through discussion, while she also identified key characteristics of positive learning environments including:

- a community of equals learning together
- shared responsibilities and ownership
- differing responsibilities equally valued
- reciprocal giving and receiving trust
- openness and shared vulnerability
- shared communication and goals
- recognizing and dealing with disjunctions through consensus

In the years that followed, other researchers and literacy specialists have further studied

the classroom conditions, texts, and inquiry approaches for creating effective and engaging group literacy experiences (e.g., Sheridan Blau, Stephanie Harvey, and Harvey Daniels).

This predominant focus on literacy learners—in community—may be partially attributed to Vygotskian theory and other cognitive theories that foreground and celebrate the sociocultural context in which substantive engagement and meaningful change can occur. Barbara Rogoff and her colleagues explore the nature of collaborative learning in terms of each group member's transformation of understanding through participation. As communities of practice attempt to create meaning or solve problems in real contexts, this transformation occurs in the community member's movement from passive observer to active participant in the group process and potentially engages three planes of participation: the personal, interpersonal, and cultural/institutional (see Rogoff et al.).

### **Teachers' Group Literacy Experiences**

With all we know about the power of group learning, how do educators themselves benefit? Isn't there a valuable role for both formal and informal teacher groups? Christine Gould et al. acknowledge the motivating power of the group experience as they discuss the value of a faculty writing group. Drawing on Etienne Wenger, they describe a community of practice as one that grows out of a sustained effort that leads to significant learning—not around “static subject matter but the very process of being engaged in, and participating in developing, an ongoing practice” (780). Peter Elbow and Mary Dean Sorcinelli describe an ongoing program for faculty groups (“Professors as Writers”) at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Interestingly, after 15 years of programming, they describe the value in shifting from a more formal workshop format to an emphasis on simply offering space that is conducive to writing in what Elbow now likes to call a “non-program.” Some organizing principles include: “keep it simple,” “focus on opportunity rather than remediation,” “affirm the integration of scholarship and teaching,” “encourage the participation of all faculty, but especially early career faculty,” and “link the notions of academic work and community” (20).

Of course, the groups described above focus primarily on faculty writing rather than reading, yet reading experiences can be as active and participatory as the writing process is. Several recent research studies address the role of teacher book clubs in influencing reading attitudes and dispositions. Mary Burbank et al. examine book clubs more broadly as mechanisms for professional development among different types of teacher groups—including pre-service and practicing teachers. They also address the role of the reader response approach in influencing the goals and procedures for book club experiences by contrasting Louise Rosenblatt's reader response theory as a more aesthetic, personal experience that involves an interaction between text and reader with Lauren Liang's cognitive approach that focuses more on textual content while de-emphasizing personal interpretations. Although Burbank and her colleagues noted that groups studied some formalized structures in their reading, teachers largely “reacted in a more holistic fashion to the texts, reacting both emotionally and conceptually to the ideas presented” (70).

Moreover, Mary Kooy reports on a small group of novice teachers who met over a two-year period. She frames this book club experience in more holistic terms as well, pointing to the importance of self-directed teacher development—where new teachers

foster their growth in a social and supportive context from the start of their careers. These early experiences can shape teacher learning.

### Why Teachers Need Poetry

Additional studies and conceptual papers focus more explicitly on the use of poetry, in particular, as both a pedagogical and reflective tool used among groups of new teachers. Ann-Marie Clark describes how teacher candidates wrote or selected poems to deepen their understanding of themselves in relationship to the children and families they worked with throughout a service learning project. In this case, the poetic lens seemed to foster internal questioning and greater vocational clarity for teachers. Richard Brown highlights the value in “paying attention to our personal experience and integrating that with our teaching,” claiming: “Contemplative teaching begins by knowing and experiencing ourselves directly. We unlearn how we habitually think, sense, and feel so that we can return to the present moment freshly and clearly” (70).<sup>1</sup>

Sharon MacKenzie features poetry writing and discussions about “self and purpose within the world” in her student teaching seminars. Mackenzie reflects: “Teachers are thinking, feeling beings, who carry with them layers of stories that shape the person they are within a given movement. Teaching itself is a story or series built upon other stories, never ending and always unpredictable” (5). With these thoughts in mind, she engaged with her student teachers as they wrote and shared individual “Who am I” poems and also created a type of collaborative poem (known as a *renga*) made up of individually fashioned haiku stanzas.

Allan Evans and Kathleen Cowin also actively engage with teacher identity through poetry in their seminars. Cowin saw that poetry became a conduit through which teacher candidates could reflect on their relationships with both students and colleagues—moving beyond the technical aspects of teaching to focus on their social and emotional experience.

Some have said it is like a ‘mini vacation’ where they can process how they are feeling about the work of teaching and take time for their own thoughts about the one who that teaches.... Using poetry to help our students focus on their inner lives honors the diversity of their life experiences and can create a process that may help instill renewal and sustainability in their careers. (317-318)

Evans examines the role of poetry, “the music of literacy,” in discussions of teachers’ “inner lives.” He read weekly poems aloud and used them to frame brief group discussions and individual reflective activities that, as Cowin’s, provided insight into new teachers’ personal passions and struggles.

My intentions for my own poetry reading group, Monday Morning Musings, are similar. First, I hope to provide a venue for new teachers to access and acknowledge the very human work of teaching—in community. Second, I seek to provide a context where teachers can simply rest and revel in poetry for poetry’s sake. The remaining pages of this essay celebrate something alive, attuned, and respectful—the poem—and explore the ways in which it can awaken and enliven teacher-readers.

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<sup>1</sup> Editors’ note: See Crawford and Willhoff, this volume, for more on the importance of *unlearning*.

*Poetry Slows Time and Heightens Attention.* We tussle with time as educators. Everything must be efficiently managed and scheduled—class periods, tests, phone calls, conferences—with the heartless face of the clock mocking us from the back of the classroom. One of the things I remember most vividly about the blur of my early teaching days was how frequently I forgot to take bathroom breaks. What strikes me most about teaching (and living) is how easily I fall into an unremitting pace and lose track of myself. Poetry slows me down and forces me to pause and be present to the words. Reading good poetry can be a calming, centering act that requires the sharp yet quiet concentration of the whole self. And I am arguably a better teacher when I am fully attuned to my students with my whole self.

*Poetic language can jar its reader into new ways of seeing and knowing.* Billy Collins claims that the study of poetry provides a model for learning:

I came to realize that to study poetry was to replicate the way we learn and think. When we read a poem, we enter the consciousness of another. It requires that we loosen some of our fixed notions in order to accommodate another point of view—which is a model of the kind of intellectual openness and conceptual sympathy that a liberal education seeks to encourage. (2001 B5)

*Poetry Thinks with Feeling.* Poetry holds the power to sway its readers simply because a thoughtful turn of phrase or a powerful image can catch us off guard and surprise us into an emotional response. Poets themselves engage both their thoughts and feelings in a written form that demands both *strategy* and *sensitivity*—a wonderful model for the act of teaching as well. Louise Rosenblatt claims that poetry helps its readers to “think rationally within an emotionally colored context” (*Literature as Exploration* 228). Ideally, poetic forms bring about the active, full engagement of a reader’s thoughts, feelings, and senses, which is what we strive for as teachers as we attempt to model the most compelling learning experiences for our students.

*Poetry Awakens.* I feel most alive when I slow down, attend, think with feeling, and appreciate the humanity around me. I believe that the act of reading poetry, for all of these reasons, can actually be a form of spiritual practice. Theodore Roethke’s often-repeated credo was, “You must believe: a poem is a holy thing—a good poem, that is” (see *On Poetry and Craft*). Reading poetry—like journaling, being outdoors, or enjoying a great meal with friends—can awaken the spirit. Opportunities for teachers to read poetry are crucial, particularly at a time when the richness of teaching and learning can be so easily reduced to mere numbers and technical trivia. Poetry especially awakens teachers to the kinds of people they are. As Stafford wrote,

If you don’t know the kind of person I am  
and I don’t know the kind of person you are  
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world  
And following the wrong god home we may miss our star. (135)

Parker Palmer’s query, “Who is the self that teaches?” also reminds us that who teachers *are* is as crucial as what teachers do (*Courage* 4).

With Palmer's words in mind, three of my former students reflect on their new teacher identities below. Having actively participated in Monday Morning Musings as students, they volunteered to build on that experience by selecting a personally meaningful poem excerpt and writing briefly about how it informed their early teaching challenges. Marie Feri Quist uses Whitman to explore what it means to achieve balance and focus in the classroom. Bill Hollands draws on Glück to acknowledge parents' fears about school (including his own). Carrie Allen Bemis finds inspiration in Rilke, as she stands at a professional crossroads.

### **Marie Feris Quist: Finding Courage to Be Spontaneous**

You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every  
moment of your life  
Long have you timidly waded, holding a plank by the shore,  
Now I will teach you to be a bold swimmer. . . .  
(From "Song of Myself" #46)

The art of gracefully balancing organization and spontaneity in the classroom is a challenge to perform as a beginning teacher. Whitman's words reinforce what is so easy to do during a lesson: become unaware—unaware of many un-planned moments that hold the potential to offer rich, genuine learning opportunities. Whitman calls this awareness a "habit": the habit of being aware of the dazzle and light within every moment and focusing on what that moment has to offer.

During my first week of teaching in the classroom, I found myself timidly holding a plank at the shore, frightened to veer from the plan I had spent hours devising. Whitman's words urge me to be bold and daring; to jump into the surf and challenge the waves; to take risks and travel where it may be unsafe, uncomfortable, or unknown.

I cheat the excitement of teaching and learning by wading at the shore, by timidly peering out across the horizon. Achieving balance between organization and spontaneity is crucial when trying to be aware of the dazzle of each present moment in my future classroom. I must boldly step away from the comfort of the shore and dive headfirst into the sea. This dive takes courage as a teacher-in-training! Maybe time will run out, activities will remain unfinished, and my organized plan will fly out the window. But by heeding Whitman's words, new water will be tested and this novelty will certainly bring authentic learning experiences to everyone involved.

### **Bill Hollands: Earning Parents' Trust**

The children go forward with their little satchels.  
And all morning the mothers have labored  
to gather the late apples, red and gold,  
like words of another language.  
(From *House on Marshland*)

So begins Louise Glück's "The School Children," which presents a mother sending her child off to school for the first time. It is not a happy occasion. School is described as an "orderly" place where teachers "wait behind great desks" (6) and "instruct [the

students] in silence” (11). Mothers are left at home to “scour the orchards” (12) for the last of the apples, the final bounty of summer and childhood. But these apples provide “little ammunition” (14) against the years of order and silence that await children at school.

As I begin my career as a teacher, full of anticipation about the exciting, stimulating atmosphere that I hope to create in my classroom, I am sobered by Glück’s depiction of school as a barren place—the “other shore” to which parents must abandon their children (5). And I have to acknowledge the truth in Glück’s assessment of how some parents feel when their children go off to school.

When I begin my first year as a teacher, my only child will be starting kindergarten, beginning his years-long journey at school. In addition to pride, I expect I will feel loss at this new stage of our lives. I will no longer be able to insulate him in a totally safe and carefree world, and I will be entrusting much of his upbringing to strangers. Will he feel loved? Will his unique strengths and challenges be recognized and nurtured?

As a teacher, I will work hard to earn the trust of parents who, like the mothers in Glück’s poem, may feel suspicious of teachers and excluded from their child’s life at school. I hope the parents of my students will know that I truly care about their children and that, in my class, their children will feel motivated, acknowledged, and safe. That is my goal.

### **Carrie Allen Bemis: Seeing a Way Forward**

My eyes already touch the sunny hill,  
going far ahead of the road I have begun.  
So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;  
it has inner light, even from a distance-

Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Walk” begins by stating, “My eyes already touch the sunny hill/ going far ahead of the road I have begun.” So often I feel that way in my own life. I can see future desires and hopeful plans, but I realize how far away I still am from my ultimate goal. I see my students wrestle with this notion as well. They know what they want to accomplish eventually but can only see their goals as intangible rays on a sunny hill. So often, teaching is about helping students stay on the road, helping them understand how to persevere until they reach their intended destination.

Rilke would suggest this perseverance comes from within, “So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;/ it has inner light, even from a distance.” Although I see in the glimmering light what may be, sometimes it is hard for me to believe that I am capable of making my own journey. Sometimes, my light is so dim I fear it will go out. And it is those people who see my light, who see the intangible, that allow me to once again be grasped by what I have not yet held. As I work with my students, I am reminded of this—how very susceptible their inner light can be to the slightest winds or soft hushes, which dull our charge to accomplish what we must help them achieve. I try to remember how important it is to be one of the voices that encourages the inner light of those around me, but does not blow it out.

As I walk along this current stretch of my road, I am faced with so many unknowns: where I will live in a month, whether or not I will attend more school, how I will overcome deep failure in my life. With this time and many to come, I hope I will cling to the light

within me. I hope I will have the courage to see the destination that lies ahead, and be grasped by what I cannot yet grasp. And if I cannot see my light, I hope I will have the courage to allow it to be shown to me by others who can.

### Conclusion

These three teachers' words demonstrate that good poetry can prompt us, as educator-humans, to *see* our students, their parents, and ourselves a little differently—with sharper eyes and softer hearts. Over the past several years, a simple Monday morning reading ritual has quietly yet powerfully connected groups of young educators, freeing them to shed a little bit of the pretense and to acknowledge their real selves. As demonstrated above, the poems new teachers select poignantly reflect their fears, anticipations, and vulnerabilities. Most importantly, their heart-felt responses reveal their deep commitment to an increasingly complex, challenging, and ultimately rewarding profession of service.

Poetry slows time and heightens attention, thinks with feeling, awakens, and humanizes us. When educators read and share poetry aloud, they jointly create a reflective pause that can set the stage for new learning. Poems, then, are not merely “flowers,” but tools for creating, turning, and sharpening new ideas. My teachers-in-training hailed poetry's power by inscribing the words of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe on the cover of black birthday binder: “A teacher who can arouse a feeling for one single good action, for one single good poem, accomplishes more than he who fills our memory with rows and rows of natural objects, classified with name and form.” Poetry and the arts complement, build on, and ultimately challenge mechanistic models of teaching and learning.



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