

The Art of Teaching Poetry



Dr. Sangeeta Shrivastava

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I. Introduction



Year after year my students groaned at the mere mention of the word ‘poetry.’ I had the same experiences as a student myself, so I certainly empathize with them. I remember poetry always being taught in a rather rigid manner, with very little creative flare incorporated. Sure, we were all told that it was important to study poetry (never why it was important), but the teacher was generally the voice, interpreter and decider of how poetry was represented.

Even after I became a teacher, I dreaded teaching poetry because of the memories that I had of sitting through poetry lessons. Then I realized, there are a lot of different ways in which poems can be introduced to students to make it relevant and interesting at the same time.

“As a child I walked with noisy fingers along the hemline for so many meadows back home.”—Jewel

I love to read poetry for many reasons, but some that strike me as being the most important are:

- Reading poetry relaxes me.
- Reading poetry makes me laugh!
- Reading poetry allows me to see into a deeper, more emotional part of myself.

Do you feel the same way? Maybe not—and no surprise there! Often, we deny our students the experience of great content, such as poetry, because:

1. We don’t want to teach it.
2. We’re simply unsure of how to teach it.
3. We didn’t have a good experience with it ourselves.

Poetry is a literary work in verse writing of high quality, great beauty, a piece of art, with emotional sincerity or intensity, a graceful expression showing imagination and deep feeling with beautiful and elegant quality. It is a profound insight that enables a poet to idealize reality and to see the things or situations in a particular way, to express his feelings of his own accord and to represent them in such a way as to delight the readers.

It is the quality of a great poetry through which the creeds and the system of human values are discussed that a reader may ultimately be enlightened and rejoiced. Poetry is also a good source of freeing somebody from ignorance, misdeeds or evils while it inspires and encourages us; instills in us noble thoughts by dealing very much with the ways we live in.

A poet is one who possesses unusual sensitivity or insight. He is able to express things in a beautiful and romantic way. He is an imaginative, a creative and artistic person. High perception and imagination with profound insight is what that differentiates between a poet and a layman. A multicolored arc in the sky is just a rainbow to a layman but a poet has greater capacity to receive sense impressions about it to express his powerful feelings. The great poet Wordsworth was such an individual whose heart leapt up with joy on beholding a rainbow and he expressed his feelings of his own accord about the rainbow.

II. Significance of poetry



Let us try to understand why we need poetry. Poetry promotes literacy, builds community, and fosters emotional resilience. It can cross boundaries that little else can. Bring some poetry into your hearts, homes, classrooms and schools. Here are five reasons why we need poetry in our schools.

Reason 1: Poetry helps us know each other and build community. In this book, I have described how poetry can be used at the start of the year to learn about where students come from and who they are. Poetry can allow kids to paint sketches of their lives, using metaphor, imagery and symbolic language to describe painful experiences, or parts of themselves that they're not ready to share. Poetry allows kids to put language to use-to make it serve a deep internal purpose, to break rules along the way (grammar, punctuation, capitalization) and to find voice, representation, community perhaps.

Reason 2: When read aloud, poetry is rhythm and music and sounds and beats. It's the most kinesthetic of all literature, it's physical and full-bodied which activates your heart and soul and sometimes bypasses the traps of our minds and the outcome is that poetry moves us.

Reason 3: Poetry opens venues for speaking and listening, much neglected domains of a robust English Language curriculum. Shared in this way, poetry brings audience, authentic audience, which motivates reluctant writers (or most writers, for that matter).

Reason 4: Poetry has space for English Language Learners. Because poems defy rules, poetry can be made accessible for beginners of English—poems can be easily scaffolded and students can find ways of expressing their voices while being limited in their vocabulary. Furthermore, poetry is universal. Beginners can learn about or read poetry in their primary language, helping them bridge their worlds.

Reason 5: Poetry builds resilience in kids and adults; it fosters social and emotional learning. A well-crafted phrase or two in a poem can help us see an experience in an entirely new way. We can gain insight that had evaded us many times, that gives us new understanding and strength. William Butler Yeats said this about poetry, “It is blood, imagination and intellect running together...It bids us to touch and taste and hear and see the world, and shrink from all that is of the brain only.”

Our schools are places of too much ‘brain only’; we must find ways to surface other ways of being, other modes of learning. And we must find ways to talk about the difficult and inexplicable things in life—death and suffering and even profound joy and transformation.

On this topic, Jeanette Winterson, a poet and writer, says this:

“...When people say that poetry is a luxury, or an option, or for the educated middle classes, or that it shouldn’t be read in school because it is irrelevant, or any of the strange and stupid things that are said about poetry and its place in our lives, I suspect that the people doing the saying have had things pretty easy. A tough life needs a tough language—and that is what poetry is. That is what literature offers—a language powerful enough to say how it is. It isn’t a hiding place. It is a finding place.”

A final suggestion about bringing poetry into your lives: don’t analyze it, don’t ask others to analyze it. Don’t deconstruct it or try to make meaning of it. Find the poems that wake you up, that make you feel as if you’ve submerged yourself in a mineral hot spring or an ice bath; find the poems that make you feel (almost) irrational joy or sadness or delight. Find the poems that make you want to roll around in them or paint their colours all over your bedroom ceiling. Those are the poems you want to play with—forget the ones that don’t make sense. Find those poems that communicate with the deepest parts of your being and welcome them in.

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