April Brannon

Love That Poem! Using Imitation to Teach Poetry

Sharon Creech's book, Love That Dog, is the story of a young poet named Jack, a good teacher, and a dog. Using free verse, Jack describes how he becomes a writer in dated journal entries, but his story is not the cliché Hollywood version of a student transforming into a writer. Jack doesn't give sappy descriptions of his martyred English teacher, nor does he fight against incredible life circumstances that lend themselves to dramatic orchestral scores in the movie version of the story. In the end, Jack doesn't publish a book, meet the president, or create world peace. No, not Jack. He is just an average kid, like so many of the kids in our classes.

But Jack has an excellent English teacher in Miss Stretchberry. She assigns freewriting and journals, she finds ways to create an audience for student work by putting it up on bulletin boards and holding class readings, and she even invites a published poet to speak to her class. As teachers, we can learn a lot from Miss Stretchberry.

Part of what makes Miss Stretchberry's poetry instruction so effective is the use of imitation in her lessons. Good teachers realize the importance of finding model poems that inspire both students' thinking and writing. In "The Reading-Writing-Reading Connection: An Approach to Poetry," Jane Ellen Glasser points out that published poets are more likely to cite other poets' writing, not English teachers' lengthy explanations, as the best way to learn to write. Mark Statman, author of Listener in the Snow: The Practice and Teaching of Poetry, makes this point succinctly when he says, "I'm not just interested in giving students models for inspiring their ideas. I also want the models to inspire how they write" (7), and he cites Kenneth Koch, a highly respected poet and poetry teacher, to support his claim.

Some teachers bristle at the notion of having students write poetry in any context but a creative writing class. They claim other genres are both more important and more teachable, and they often cite students' poor attempts at poetic writing to support their position. Other teachers don't like the idea of having students imitate, claiming that the practice is the equivalent of having students fill in the blanks, a hollow exercise devoid of any creativity or critical thinking.

Personal experience tells me that lessons with strong models appeal to many students and teachers. Students create work that they can be proud of, and teachers use these imitation lessons year after year as highlights of their curriculum, posting student work to bulletin boards and walls in celebratory displays. For example, I've seen the imitation lesson that stems from George Ella Lyon's poem "Where I'm From" described in at least three different journal articles, in G. Lynn Nelson's book Writing and Being: Embracing Your Life through Creative Journaling and in Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey's Background Knowledge, at several conference presentations, and most recently in a newspaper article about an art show in Albuquerque in which writers used their imitations of the poem as part of a larger visual art display. Just as significantly, I've seen student versions of the poem voluntarily displayed beneath the
clear plastic sleeves of their binders and heard them proudly read in poetry slams; this is compelling evidence of personal investment in writing.

**Students’ Poetry Exposure Experience**

I ask critics to consider what I would call a typical student’s cumulative poetry exposure experience, and while I realize I am making huge generalizations that certainly don’t apply to all students, I do think these generalizations can be useful for thinking about how to teach the writing of poetry in the secondary setting. Many students have lots of experience with poetry when they are young—they grow up on Dr. Seuss and jump rope to nursery rhymes. Shel Silverstein’s poems are part of the canon of childhood, right up there with fairy tales and Mother Goose. Poems and books with rhyming words help young readers recognize sound patterns and learn to spell, all while delighting them with the rhythm of language.

And then, nothing poetic. Well, not exactly nothing, but certainly a notable decrease in exposure to poetry occurs as reading levels increase. By middle school, most students’ reading consists of text and chapter books, graphic novels, and Facebook posts. Not much poetry.

I realize there are many great poets whose work appeals to adolescents—Miss Stretchberry uses Walter Dean Myers in her class—but experience tells me that poetry is not standard fare for most students. The ones who read poetry on their own are rare, and the rest read only the poems we teach. By high school, students are studying the form of the Petrarchan sonnet, reviewing the requirements of an ode, and memorizing literary terms for standardized tests, and the poems students read in class are the ones printed in classroom textbooks, written by poets long gone.

Almost ten years ago, Dana Gioia, a banker by trade and poetry enthusiast by hobby, wrote a landmark article titled “Can Poetry Matter?” for The Atlantic. In it, he argues that poetry does, indeed, matter, and that for the art to flourish, poets and readers must be familiar with both classic and contemporary works. The article received unprecedented attention and led to the publishing of a book by the same name, which is now in its second printing. Poets, poetry readers, and university professors all responded to Gioia’s points—some in support of his vision, others offended by it. While I agree with Gioia that there is much to learn from canonical poetry, I do think teenagers need a hook into the genre, and that hook is more likely to come in the form of contemporary poetry rather than traditional verse. What’s more, I think it is important that students have real role models they can look to, not just ghosts of poets past, so rather than creating a Dead Poets Society, I think we should strive to create an Alive and Still Writing Poets Society.

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**GUIDELINES FOR CHOOSING MODEL POEMS**

- **Consider the Language.** Is the poem written in language that students can easily relate to? Does it contain phrasing patterns that are familiar and easily replicated?

- **Look Carefully at Form.** Is the poem structured in a way that will be generative for writing? Having students write Shakespearean sonnets may help them learn that particular form, but the form itself doesn’t make getting started particularly easy, nor does it allow much leeway. Rather than locking students into rigid structures, choose poems that provide movable pegs for students’ thinking.

- **Consider What the Poem “Teaches” about Writing.** Look for poems that provide points of craft that are useful in writing poetry and other forms of writing as well. Poems that do interesting things with sentence and line length, that use extended metaphor, or that provide ideas for interesting ways into writing about a topic are useful. For example, Wallace Stevens’s “Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” consists of six stanzas, each one written from a different perspective. Similarly, Louise Glück’s Pulitzer Prize–winning book, The Wild Iris, contains poems written from the perspective of the flowers.

- **Find Interesting Subject Matter.** Poetry gets a bad rap in popular culture. Popular ideas about poetry include cheesy rhymes and cliché sentimentality, overwritten descriptions of flowering fields, and cryptic, angst-filled regurgitations of feelings. Choose poems about topics or ideas that will appeal to students.

- **Include a Mixture of Contemporary and Classic Poetry.** Contemporary poetry doesn’t exist in a vacuum, and students need to be exposed to a range of poetry to develop their writing and their thinking.

- **Consider Using Sections of a Poem for Imitation.** Sometimes just a stanza or two of a poem is enough to allow students to express themselves and learn about craft. Having students imitate an entire poem can often be daunting and unrealistic.
to encourage our students to join the club. (See the sidebar on page 52 for advice on selecting good model poems for students.)

**Poets That Inspire Secondary Students**

Below I describe three imitation lessons that utilize poems that are not, to my knowledge, regularly taught. All three poets highlighted—Ellen Bass, Mary Oliver, and Margaret Atwood—are award-winning contemporary poets. I’ve chosen poems that are currently available on the Internet so they can easily be obtained (see sidebar for links), but a citation with their original place of publication is included in the bibliography in case the links fail. Because of the expense involved in republishing, the actual poems could not be included in this article; however, student-written imitations of the poems are provided in their entirety and will make useful models of student writing in classroom settings.

**Ellen Bass**

Last fall, *The American Poetry Review* featured Ellen Bass’s “Relax” in a large font double-page spread, and its release coincided perfectly with the start of a new school year. The poem has nothing to do with school—it is a list poem that chronicles all the terrible things that can happen in life—but it is a good reminder that there are plenty of things beyond individual control. For anyone staring down a fresh semester, this is a useful lesson.

I used this poem on the first day of my university class, Methods of Teaching English, a course that coincides with preservice teachers’ student teaching. Rather than starting the class with an overview of all the requirements of the student-teaching program, I began by sharing this poem and then reading my imitation of it. In the imitation, all the imagery was situated in the world of a secondary school teacher, and students laughed nervously as I told them that they, too, would teach a lesson that bombed, that someone would be tardy to class more than once, and that they might have to miss a Friday night out because of too many papers to grade. They then turned their attention back to Bass’s poem and answered these three questions in small groups before participating in a whole-class discussion:

- What do you notice about the form of this poem?
- Choose a notable line or two and talk about why it sticks out.
- What can we learn about craft by studying this poem?

In the large-group discussion, students noticed that the poem was written as a list, that it included a series of specific and concrete images, that the lines sometimes broke in the middle of a long series of images (cream / melting . . . throw / your) and these breaks create an exasperated effect. They also noticed that lines were short definitive sentences that leave no room for argument, such as, “Your parents will die.” Students talked about the Buddhist allusion and how it added depth to the poem, and how the imagery at the end provided a sensory experience as the words conveyed a dictum to be in the present moment. The conversation was rich with interpretation and literary analysis even though the focus was on craft.

Like any writing lesson, imitation lessons require careful attention to writing process, and students need some sort of invention activity to get started. After the discussion of “Relax,” they made lists of what worried them about the upcoming school year and turned those lists into their own version of the poem, trying to imitate Bass’s style. Secondary students could write imitations to start the school year, making lists of potential pitfalls ahead. For example, they could write about the dangers of their extracurricular interests, creating poems about the perils of cheerleading, soccer, or drama, or they could even write poems at the

**LINKS TO MODEL POEMS**

“Relax” by Ellen Bass

“The Sunflowers” by Mary Oliver
http://www.dotwebb.com/drdot/sunflowers_oliver.html

“It Is Dangerous to Read Newspapers” by Margaret Atwood
http://researchist.wordpress.com/2009/03/04/it-is-dangerous-to-read-newspapers/
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beginning of a research paper unit, comically addressing their angst before drafting.

While I do not, some might consider a few of the images in Bass’s poem to be inappropriate for the secondary classroom. Those sections of the poem could easily be excerpted out for middle school students or more conservative populations. I compiled the best lines from students’ imitations into a whole-class poem that was distributed to everyone in the course. The following is the class imitation:

The Agenda

Student teaching will be tough.
Orientation will feel like boot camp, and
you will be the last one to get your teaching placement.
Your brand new flats—the ones you spent your last paycheck on—
will blister your feet so badly you waddle to the front of the class.
Even though you live Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Dickens,
a veteran English teacher will bring up Ann Radcliffe, and
you’ll have no idea who that is.
The pretty girls in the corner will be more concerned
with touching up their makeup than picking up a book.
When you ask them to discuss symbolism
they’ll only look at each other,
rolling their meticulously adorned eyes.
You will consistently forget your turkey avocado sandwich
or pesto pasta you painstakingly prepared the night before,
and your lunch will consist of lumpy, unidentifiable objects from the cafeteria.
Despite late nights and canned protein drinks,
you’ll fall miserably behind, finding yourself under a pile
of essays, unbathed and wearing the same underwear as two days before.
You will get one job offer, in rural Wyoming, for winter only,
no benefits, no family, only snowmen for company.
Your master teacher will resent her teaching job punishing both you and the students for her lack of novel-writing success.
Essay prompts will turn into spitballs,
PowerPoints will become naptime,
the first question a student asks will be one you don’t know the answer to.
There’s a story about a man who falls in love with the king’s daughter. To win her, the man must stand
in the arena before all of the nation’s people
and open one of two doors.
He will find either love or a ferocious tiger.
Joy or Destruction. Happiness or Devastation.
The alarm goes off. Another day awaits.
Stand up straight. Choose a door. Grab the handle.
Pull.
Inspired by Ellen Bass’s “Relax”

Mary Oliver

Pulitzer Prize–winning poet Mary Oliver composes poems that are accessible and appealing to students, and one of the reasons Oliver is such a good poet to teach is because of the striking images she creates. She writes mostly about the natural world, finding meaning in the trees and creatures that surround her. Most students come to her work with at least some prior knowledge of the outdoor world—either in pictures they’ve seen or in real-life experiences—so they can approach the poems with familiarity and even some expertise on the subject matter. Furthermore, as Steven Ratiner points out, many of her poems follow a three-tiered structure:

The first stage involves seeing, a careful scrutiny of the object. But that seeing evolves into a deeper focus, a heightened awareness. Suddenly we become present to the moment. It’s almost like a meditation. But inevitably there comes a seeing beyond. (45)

Ratiner’s description of the structure of Oliver’s poems is a useful way of guiding students through many of Oliver’s poems, of framing discussions, and of thinking about metaphor. The poem “Mussels” provides a careful description of not only mussels but also the surrounding environment and the narrator’s encroachment on the creatures. Using the same craft questions discussed above, students’ attention drifts to the layout of the words on the page as they notice the indentations across the page and how the form of the poem channels the tide moving in and out. They discuss the varying uses of repetition and notice how it creates rhythm in the poem and contributes to overall meaning.

When it is time to write, students imitate the first two stanzas, using concrete detail and the rep-
etition of prepositions to frame their work. They have the option of laying their lines on the page in a way that is significant to their subject or of following Oliver’s line-break arrangement.

Iris, a ninth grader in my summer school class at Bernalillo High School, a somewhat rural school in New Mexico, wrote a poem about the jackrabbits that dot the desert landscape where she lives. On the surface, Iris’s poem appears to follow the layout of Oliver’s, but as she drafted, she shared that she wanted her lines out to form the ears of a rabbit. Here is her poem:

Jackrabbits
In the New Mexico desert, 
in the dry sagebrush
    in its skeleton sagebrush shadow, they lounge
With their ears like knives on point 
with their noses jumping 
with their hind legs hunched
    in the skeleton sagebrush shadow.
   *Inspired by Mary Oliver’s “Mussels”*

Margaret Atwood
Margaret Atwood’s poem “It Is Dangerous to Read Newspapers” is a serious look at what it means to be part of a global community and allows students the opportunity to write about something beyond themselves and what they know personally. The poem is constructed by using the juxtaposition of unlike images and combines ordinary moments from life with scenes of violence.

Student teacher Kellie Hicks taught the following related lesson to eleventh-grade students at Diamond Bar High School, a diverse suburban school located in Orange County, California. After reading and discussing Atwood’s poem in class, students found newspaper articles about a current event. The following guidelines were provided to help students choose their articles:

- Your story must be about a group of people, not an individual.
- You may not use celebrity gossip.
- Because you will use the juxtaposition technique discussed in class, your topic should be somewhat removed from your daily routine.

Students annotated their news articles and wrote paragraph summaries of the content for homework. In class the next day, they chose two facts from their reading and “translated” them into poetic language. Hicks discussed the importance of using vivid verbs and concrete imagery, and she provided many examples of “translated lines,” such as the following:

**Original**
The UN declared genocide in Darfur, but failed to send troops.

**Poetic Version**
The UN continued sleepwalking over Sudanese graves.

Once students finished their poetic lines, they brainstormed ordinary moments of their daily routines to juxtapose against the newly created poetic news lines. Because the lesson occurred in the wake of the newly passed controversial Arizona Immigration Law, SB1070, many students chose to write about the legislation. Here is Jayvon’s poem:

**Immigration in the Newspaper**
When I was at school
hearing the tapping of pens
the immigrants in Arizona were hearing
how they’re aliens and don’t belong.

As I fell asleep in science class
the immigrant fell on the hot dirt floor
of Arizona with hands behind his back
from the push of the cop.

As I take the car ride home in my luxurious car
with AC
the thirty immigrants are getting
a hot, bumpy, and horrible ride back to the border.

As I rest myself in my comfortable warm bed
the poor immigrants are dumped
into the cold unforgiving place they ran away from.

It is dangerous to read newspapers.

*Inspired by Margaret Atwood’s “It Is Dangerous to Read Newspapers”*

**Inspiring Creativity**
When Jack worries if poets will be angry because he imitated their work, Miss Stretchberry tells him to write inspired by on his writing. I think the verb, inspire, is exactly what imitation exercises do for students. Sure, if we have students fill out worksheets that are the equivalent of *Mad Libs*, the
exercise is hollow. But if we use poems as scaffolds, or mentor texts, that allow students to see how a poem works from the inside out, students not only gain exposure to poetry, they acquire writing skills that transfer to other genres. What’s more, if students become skilled at looking at how poetry is put together, they can use that skill to look at how personal narrative, analytical arguments, persuasive essays, scientific reports, and other genres (even commercials) are constructed. They may become better and more sophisticated readers because they can see how form contributes to meaning.

I often hear teachers say that their curriculum simply does not allow time for creative writing, and I am sympathetic to the constraints of the modern classroom. But I do think we can—and should!—find a place for poetry writing in our curricula. Once students are comfortable reading for craft, the possibilities for poem imitation are endless. For example, students could easily imitate Mary Oliver’s “Sunflowers” and use Gatsby’s mansion or Shakespeare’s England as their subjects to demonstrate understanding of the literature they are reading. Similarly, early in their reading of Romeo and Juliet, students could write a poem like Ellen Bass’s “Relax” from Romeo’s point of view, using all the things that could possibly go wrong with his newfound love for Juliet as the fuel for their lists. At the end of the play, students can compare their hypothetical musings with the actual outcome to see how their ideas stacked up. A unit on reading expository texts could end with an “It Is Dangerous” poem, inspired by Margaret Atwood and written from students’ research.

Teaching is a creative endeavor, and we should give students a chance to exercise their creativity by allowing space for poetry writing in our classes.  

Notes

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Works Cited


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