Playing with Difficult Poetry: High School Seniors and Arthur Sze's Quipu

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A real work of art makes us stop and pay attention. It breaks through our crust of habit and routine.

—Reginald Shepherd, “On Difficulty in Poetry”

I was scared—my supervisor had said yes. I had been assigned two sections of Contemporary Literature, a semester-long senior elective, and I wanted to do something new with poetry. I am lucky enough to teach in a department that supports taking an occasional risk, so I emailed my since-retired supervisor Anthony Bango, floating a tentative rationale for teaching Arthur Sze's Quipu. He said yes—just what I wanted!—and I was scared.

Sze's poetry is nonlinear, adopting principles from science, anthropology, and history into a multilayered poetic texture—text unlike anything students typically encounter in high school. For me, this addressed key instructional goals: expanding students' concept of what literature is, pushing them into strange territory, and helping them manage the metaphorical and structural phenomenon Quipu presents.

A quipu is an Incan device made of a main cord and smaller dyed, spun, and knotted cords used for record keeping, calculation, and even narratives. One of Sze's forms is the quipu-like poem, a multi-sectioned sequence incorporating various lists and organizational tools, images, and references into what Sze calls a “braided narrative.”

Although I planned and tried a variety of approaches, what seemed to help students most was collaborating on imitations of Sze's style. Based on this work, I suggest opening up the literature curriculum to more stylistically challenging texts, and implementing a more sustained use of creative writing techniques to support and extend that reading. The implications of this approach are curricular and instructional as well as ethical.

Difficulty and Play

Poetry is a peculiar genre. Poems bend, break, create, and re-create rules all the time, and difficult poetry especially “disrupts the conventional unfolding of a reading,” presenting any number of “comprehension obstacles” (Yaron 136). In “On Difficulty in Poetry,” poet Reginald Shepherd notes three basic levels of difficulty—recognition, explication, and interpretation—and at one time or another, readers of Sze will face every one of these.

Still, as poet Robert Pinsky maintains in Slate, difficulty is not inherently negative:

Difficulty, after all, is one of life’s essential pleasures: music, athletics, dance thrill us partly because they engage great difficulties. Epics and tragedies, no less than action movies and mysteries, portray an individual’s struggle with some great difficulty. . . . Golf and video games, for certain demographic categories, provide inexhaustible, readily available sources of difficulty.

Shepherd further observes “a whole industry of verbal challenges, from crossword puzzles to Scrabble, that the so-called general public relishes.”

Poet and critic Charles Bernstein deemphasizes both the text's difficult qualities and the reader's struggles in a piece for Harper's Magazine:

The difficulty you are having with the poem may suggest that there is a problem not with you the reader or with the poem but with the relation between you and the poem.
Working through the issues that arise as part of this relation can be a valuable learning experience. (24)

I came to believe that it is precisely this transaction—this interplay—that is primary. I suspect that we can guide virtually any “type” of student to find meaning in even the most challenging literature—if we can set up an effective relationship.

During the first several days of a three-week unit, in conversation and in writing, students repeatedly mentioned being puzzled by the language, frustrated by the lack of a linear narrative, and almost angry at the poems’ apparent pointlessness: they weren’t “about” anything; the language was random, scattered, arbitrary. I asked them to look at three short poems, select which one was “clearest,” and write descriptions of how they worked through it. Reading those descriptions, I found two common elements: subject and language. In terms of subject matter, they worked through a poem more readily if it had a stable topic or a linear narrative—if they could “follow” the poem, see what it was “about.” Many valued simpler language for the same reasons. Based on these data, I thought we might somehow make use of the intersection of subject matter and language.

I explained that some poems teach us how to read them as we read them, then had students look for a few such moments (such as “Sipping mint tea / on the longest day of the year, I sense how / the balance of life sways, and a petal may tip it”). They read a few short poems for homework and memorized two short excerpts (one to three lines); the next day in class, they wrote down their memorized lines and explained how they fit in with their perception of that poem, or the entire book. They later paired up for think-alouds to further articulate how those lines anchored their reading.

Ever since working with middle school students in DC in the late 1990s, I have been struck by how well even struggling students begin to handle (at times quite unusual) poetry if approached with patience, flexibility, modesty, and a sense of play. At the midpoint of the unit, all of my seniors agreed—some strongly so—that Sze’s book made them read in a different way, and almost everyone agreed it was more difficult than other poetry they had read. The book was officially “out there” for students—difficult, unconventional, challenging—when compared to their typical reading styles as well as the already-out-there genre of poetry. But they weren’t giving up.

Kenneth Koch’s contribution to the role of poetry in public schools is teaching “reading poetry and writing poetry as one subject” (3). His aim was to surround children with poems “that were worthy of their attention and that could give them good experiences and help them in their own writing” (8). In preliminary poetry responses students wrote on the day I distributed Quipu, no one reported positive experiences with poetry since elementary school, and although few students have entered my class as poetry fans, I’d never faced such a void of pleasure. Recalling this appalling statistic while browsing Koch one afternoon, a new goal quickly emerged: giving students positive experiences with poetry. I decided to return to something I used to do as a DC middle school writer-in-residence: imitations.

We started with a few short imitations, based on some of Sze’s one-page poems. Students had 10–15 minutes to work, usually using the first phrase of the poem’s sentences as a starting point, taking it in whatever direction they liked. These shorter imitations rarely went beyond five or six sentences, but the way the students started smiling, laughing, debating, and opening up their thinking was enough to sell me. In weekly open-ended responses (which they write throughout my
course), they described how they were beginning to see how Sze was working. If this gave them a positive experience with poetry, then I was happy.

At the end of the unit, students wrote an "ultimate imitation," a next-to-last activity that sprawled over two 43-minute classes. The ultimate imitation required them to attempt a short qui pu poem, including the use of some of Sze's various habits and organizational principles. I typed and displayed their poems on the LCD screen as students read the poems aloud, section by section.

Many imitations offered exciting sections, prompting laughter or baffled delight. Some bits of both the ultimate and earlier imitations needed only a line cut and a few phrases reworded to, as I joked, "become a real poem."

Shepherd asserts, a "poem may not adhere to standard, linear logic, but it must have a logic of its own," and that is what students began to perceive. The imitations became what Linda Kucan, in her work with 1-poems, calls "invitations for students to try out the poet's way of knowing" (524). Kucan is a rare voice in the study of poetry writing because of the notion that writing can be a means for enhancing understanding from reading" (518) as opposed to writing being an end in itself, or a vehicle for students' exploration of their own identities. Likewise, for my purposes here, the writing was in service of the reading.

Despite the text's difficulty, its seeming and radical otherness, students firmly believed that collaborating on imitations had a positive effect on their experience. On our last day, I asked them to explain which activities and resources were most helpful during the unit. Imitations of Sze's work and rereading/reading aloud were noted more than twice as often as anything else.

Implications

I wonder just how far we could push students in terms of challenging literature. If students can "handle" something so far outside the scope of the mainstream high school English department, then should our stance toward curriculum change? Does the curriculum dominated by realistic fiction and drama begin to make more room for other genres, even hybrid genres? Are we giving students enough credit for what they are capable of? Might we legitimately challenge them more, asking them to read and therefore think in radically new ways? How far can (should) we go?

There is also an instructional implication. Amy L. Eva-Wood has studied how readers react if they are "not only given permission, but also prompted to draw on their personal responses while making sense of poetry" (174). She analyzed the writing and think-aloud protocols of a control group of eleventh graders receiving poetry instruction with an emphasis on literary analysis, compared to an experimental group receiving instruction that emphasized the emotional and experiential facets of reading. In virtually every arena, the experimental group's approach yielded more positive results: more questions, more sophisticated questions, increased interest, increased identification with the poems' speakers, as well as an increased ability to analyze the poems. If this less (not non-) analytical approach paradoxically promotes deeper analysis, to what extent can imitation and other creative writing techniques serve as useful teaching strategies?

Finally, there is an ethical undercurrent. If, as David Ian Hanauer says, poetry "has the potential for promoting experiences of the individual life and as such can provide moments of contact among individuals living in diverse communities" (86), then perhaps students who play seriously with reading or writing poetry can expand and share the experience of their individual lives, and in that mutual process become more empathetic, more comfortable with new and seemingly strange experiences. If students can have positive experiences with difficult poetry, perhaps they can find ways to cope with other difficult experiences—by investigating them closely, even temporarily immersing themselves in that strangeness, and discerning the inner workings of some new dynamic that at first seemed so far beyond them.

Works Cited


Kucan, Linda. "‘P’ Poems: Invitations for Students to Deepen Literary
Oops, He Thought

It was a quiet ride
from the party.
Finally she said,

I thought I had told
you not to say anything
about my sister.

He knew she knew she had.

But it doesn’t . . .
he paused, knowing he had
caught himself in his own trap.
Remember to never begin a defense sentence with but, he reminded himself.

He began again,
mouthing his words with
deliberate care . . .
What I thought was, knowing
Brad and Jan don’t know your sister, that they could offer some
insight into . . .

Don’t even go there, she said.
You’re not helping yourself.

They stared at the silent
dark road, the white lines
pacing their distance to home.

—Bruce A. Noll
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Bruce A. Noll’s poems have appeared in numerous journals, including The American Entomologist, Manzanita Review, and JAMA. He has one chapbook, The Gospel Edits. For 42 years Bruce has been bringing the poetry of Walt Whitman to audiences through his presentation, Pure Grass, which has been seen in 26 states and five foreign countries. He recently retired from the College of Education at the University of New Mexico. Email him at banoll@unm.edu.
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