Teaching poetry offers both challenges and promises for student engagement and response. Because of the ways many students interact with poems in school settings—with an emphasis on the technical elements of poems, rather than on the emotional resonances they evoke—for many learners, poetry can often seem elusive and uncommonly difficult. This is not a new phenomenon. In her article “Teaching Poetry in High School,” published in English Journal in 1926, Clara Horine laments the “average high-school pupil’s indifference to [poetry, which] in some instances [amounts] to positive distaste or contempt” (23). She continues, however, by suggesting that the fault lies primarily with teachers, who may “have been violating in our practice some of the fundamental principles of the art of poetry” (23). She admonishes her readers at the time: “We teachers must remember that poetry is essentially an art to be appreciated, not a body of information to be imparted” (35). More than 80 years later, the instructional issues she describes in the article—an over-emphasis on form; a focus on explication (rather than appreciation); and a tendency to overlook the poem’s musical elements (which are best heard when poems are read aloud)—are still plaguing us.

“Poetry is the genre most English teachers seem least comfortable with,” Diane Lockward explains in an article that offers teaching advice she gathered from interviews with poets Robert Kendall, Marie Howe, Mark Hillringhouse, and others (65). She discovered in talking with teaching colleagues that most “said they’d never had an English teacher who taught poetry effectively and, therefore, they had no models to emulate” (65). I have found comparable sentiments among teachers as I have conducted professional development workshops that focus on teaching poetry. Teachers often do not feel fully equipped to initiate students into the world of poetry. The result is that they rely on overly familiar poems and methods of studying them, so that students are introduced to only a limited range of poetic styles, subjects, and authors. These instructional choices are often the result of feeling “unsure what to talk about or where to begin the discussion” (Lockward 67). It is important for students to understand the architecture of a poem, but it is crucial, if we want students to appreciate poetry’s impact, for us to teach verse from what Horine terms “the outside inward to the soul of the poem” (24).

This article describes an initiative, the “Transpoemation Project,” in which a group of ninth graders in an urban high school interacted with poetry in unexpected ways, employing 21st-century literacies that challenged the students to become “active constructors of meaning” (Gainer and Lapp 63). The multi-phased assignment culminated with the creation of “digital shorts”—compact “films” that combine text, images, and music. The films later became part of a “premiere” event, which offered both challenges and promises for student engagement and response. Because of the ways many students interact with poems in school settings—with an emphasis on the technical elements of poems, rather than on the emotional resonances they evoke—for many learners, poetry can often seem elusive and uncommonly difficult. This is not a new phenomenon. In her article “Teaching Poetry in High School,” published in English Journal in 1926, Clara Horine laments the “average high-school pupil’s indifference to [poetry, which] in some instances [amounts] to positive distaste or contempt” (23). She continues, however, by suggesting that the fault lies primarily with teachers, who may “have been violating in our practice some of the fundamental principles of the art of poetry” (23). She admonishes her readers at the time: “We teachers must remember that poetry is essentially an art to be appreciated, not a body of information to be imparted” (35). More than 80 years later, the instructional issues she describes in the article—an over-emphasis on form; a focus on explication (rather than appreciation); and a tendency to overlook the poem’s musical elements (which are best heard when poems are read aloud)—are still plaguing us.

“Poetry is the genre most English teachers seem least comfortable with,” Diane Lockward explains in an article that offers teaching advice she gathered from interviews with poets Robert Kendall, Marie Howe, Mark Hillringhouse, and others (65). She discovered in talking with teaching colleagues that most “said they’d never had an English teacher who taught poetry effectively and, therefore, they had no models to emulate” (65). I have found comparable sentiments among teachers as I have conducted professional development workshops that focus on teaching poetry. Teachers often do not feel fully equipped to initiate students into the world of poetry. The result is that they rely on overly familiar poems and methods of studying them, so that students are introduced to only a limited range of poetic styles, subjects, and authors. These instructional choices are often the result of feeling “unsure what to talk about or where to begin the discussion” (Lockward 67). It is important for students to understand the architecture of a poem, but it is crucial, if we want students to appreciate poetry’s impact, for us to teach verse from what Horine terms “the outside inward to the soul of the poem” (24).

This article describes an initiative, the “Transpoemation Project,” in which a group of ninth graders in an urban high school interacted with poetry in unexpected ways, employing 21st-century literacies that challenged the students to become “active constructors of meaning” (Gainer and Lapp 63). The multi-phased assignment culminated with the creation of “digital shorts”—compact “films” that combine text, images, and music. The films later became part of a “premiere” event,
during which each student introduced his or her poetry project to classmates and invited guests. The premiere offered the students an authentic audience for their work as well as the opportunity to make an oral presentation. To negotiate the requirements of the project, the students engaged in a range of literacy activities. They read, interpreted, discussed, translated, imagined, revised, visualized, analyzed, synthesized, evaluated, and created—skills that are prized in any classroom and that play a leading role in the standards that appear in language arts curricula.

**Contextualizing the Transpoemation Project: The Backstory**

I first visited the ninth graders involved in the Transpoemation Project late in the academic year. I was observing in their classroom in my role as an itinerant literacy coach charged with assisting their first-year teacher in developing lessons to engage what were considered by the school to be uncooperative and difficult learners. The initial year of high school for these students had been marked by upheaval. Their Teach for America member teacher had struggled to get his professional footing and did not return after the winter break. They then suffered ten weeks of revolving-door substitutes before a full-time replacement English teacher was hired. When I entered the classroom in April, the new teacher was sitting in a student desk near the back of the room, talking loudly on her cell phone. One student stood beside the teacher, clearly agitated. I realized that the teacher was explaining to the student’s parent that her daughter was being disrespectful in class. After handing the phone to the student, who listened, then handed the phone back to the teacher, and slammed her body into a desk, the teacher called another student to stand beside her and began dialing that student’s home phone number.

In our debriefing session after the lesson, I asked the teacher to tell me about the phone calls. She expressed her frustration with the class and her determination to end the school year on a positive note. As we brainstormed ideas for a final assignment that might address the students’ needs and engage them in a deep way, we discussed the potential of pairing poetry, which many of the students struggled with, and technology, which even the most recalcitrant students often find naturally interesting. The teacher confessed that she did not feel she had the technical expertise to teach a unit that involved any sort of filmmaking, so we agreed to co-teach the unit, drawing on the digital storytelling work I had done with students in other settings.

Five weeks later, the ninth graders concluded their year by showcasing the digital shorts they had developed to illustrate the text of an original poem. All 17 students in the class completed the assignment, the first such feat in the entire academic year. Thus is the potential power of poetry and of multimodal projects that coax struggling students to work tenaciously through a complex assignment. The project also provided the students opportunities to engage with a “creative process that required [them] to visualize and use their imaginations” (Czarnecki 18). The students were encouraged to read like writers and filmmakers, noting structure, tone, word choice, imagistic language, and elements of style.

**Exploring Poetry through Digital Media Tools: The Rationale**

Lynne Dorfman and Rose Capelli point out in *Poetry Mentor Texts* that exposing students to poems and asking them to imitate elements of the composition of a poem helps them reflect on their own literary practices. “Mentor texts provide multiple opportunities for scaffolding . . . aspects of good writing,” they suggest (8). The Transpoemation Project relies on strategic close reading of a mentor poem to assist students as they compose poems of their own. Mike Schmoker calls this kind of attentive reading of a text “the first step to deep understanding” (491). The goal is for the students to generate a draft of an original poem in a few class meetings that can then be translated visually, using simple moviemaking software. A second goal for this particular group of ninth graders was to involve them in a project that enticed them to demonstrate their capacity to tackle an academic task with commitment and
enthusiasm. The assignment asked the students to attend to the writer’s use of language and to analyze themes, but it also asked them to be playful in their interactions with the text, imitating poetic structures and language patterns. The poet Robert Kendall warns us that “students tend to be bored by talk about technique or theory,” the default method for many teachers when they teach poetry (qtd. in Lockward 67). We heeded this caution in the development of the unit, focusing on instructional activities that the students could not complete without assistance (offering “high challenge”), but also scaffolding the work to enable them to successfully complete the tasks they were given (providing “high support”). Rather than teach any poetic element in isolation, we instead integrated discussions of rhythm, literary devices, line readings, historical context, and biographical influences evident in a poet’s work into our conversations about translating language from written to pictographic form. Knowing that they were creating films of the poems they were writing helped the students examine the effects of imagistic lines as well as the connotative and denotative uses of language. Furthermore, translating a poem from the page to the screen highlighted the importance of analysis: students reading the same poem may interpret the lines in quite different ways, and the aesthetic choices they make as they animate the poems with media invite readers/viewers to experience the “filmmaker’s” interpretation of the text.

Introducing the Transpoemation Project to Students: The Instructional Approach

We introduced the two-week unit by asking the students to read and respond to Audre Lorde’s poem, “Hanging Fire,” which features a 14-year-old speaker commenting on the unfairness of what she perceives to be the world around her. The poem begins: “I am fourteen / and my skin has betrayed me” (Lorde 308). These lines are followed by the refrain, “and momma’s in the bedroom / with the door closed” (308). In fact, this refrain concludes
each of the poem’s three stanzas. We chose this poem for the students to read and respond to for a number of reasons: Lorde, an African American writer renowned for her feminist ideals and activism, is a revered but understudied voice in the high school curriculum; the teenaged speaker is approximately the same age as the ninth-grade students involved in the project, and, as such, the speaker’s misgivings about the world represent the ego concerns of adolescence; and the features of the poem (the stanzas, the refrain, the catalogue of laments) allow for easy emulation. We wanted the students to feel immediately drawn to both the language and the content of the poem.

In the first lesson of the unit, I read the three-stanza poem aloud to the students as they viewed it on a screen at the front of the classroom. We then read the poem together, with one student volunteering to read each stanza and with the class reading the refrain in unison. The choral reading of the refrain emphasized its significance to both the theme and the rhythm of the poem. It was only after listening to the poem that we began to discuss the speaker, tone, themes, and literary features. The students were immediately interested to hear the voice of a 14-year-old; seeing a poem written in the voice of a contemporary teenager was unexpected. After listening to the poem, we examined Lorde’s choices as a writer: the repetition, wordplay, line breaks, exaggerations. We then looked closely at the language of the poem, beginning with the two-word title, “Hanging Fire”—which seems connected to the content of the poem in only a metaphorical way—and discussed the images those words conjured for us. We also reviewed each stanza of the poem and analyzed how the list of complaints the speaker has about her life are enumerated and then punctuated by the refrain. This technique of examining the poem, only after experiencing it as a read-aloud, offered the students an opportunity to develop an interest in the poem before beginning to parse it.

Later, in small groups, the students revisited the structural features of the poem as they used a template to answer a series of questions that allowed them to write their own lines, mirroring Lorde’s. For example, to help the students create a title for their own poems, modeled after Lorde’s, we asked them to note that Lorde has used a participial adjective (“hanging”) followed by an unexpected noun (“fire”). They then drafted titles that followed the same structure. This exercise emphasized the importance of the title of a poem, which often acts to contextualize what follows, but it also demonstrated an unfamiliar technique—forced connection, “an exercise in creative thinking” (Cox, Default, and Hopkins 81)—for generating an interesting title. The students drafted titles such as “Aging Wisdom,” “Falling Memories,” “Dangling Sky,” and “Bettering Yesterday,” imitating Lorde’s construction but also making the titles their own. Using Lorde’s title as a model allowed the students to easily create interesting and “poetic” titles, a writing skill they typically struggle with.

We were intentional in our use of instructional language, describing this phase of the assignment to the students as apprenticeship—that phase of learning to do something in which we study the work of a master and “copy” it as a technique that allows us to move toward mastery ourselves. We wanted to distinguish the exercise in mimicry from plagiarism or misappropriation of Lorde’s ideas and language. We explained, for example, that many young artists spend hours in museums and galleries looking closely at elements of a fine painting, trying to replicate the technique the artist used to render a painting’s subjects. The point of such an exercise is to become practiced at the skill required to produce something artful; the skill can then be personalized, manipulated, and re-imagined to create something new.

Once the students had drafted poems of their own, they worked in small groups to revise, and then we moved to the computer lab where they learned to use MovieMaker, free editing software available for personal computers. None of the students had used this program before, but as I have observed in teaching editing to students in the past (see Emert, “Interactive,” “Transpoemations”), they picked up the requisite skills quickly. In addition to learning about MovieMaker, the students also practiced more familiar technology skills, such as searching the Internet for images; downloading, saving, and filing documents for later use; keyboarding; and creating an organization system that allows for easy access to the elements of the digital project—skills that are transferable to other school assignments.

In the lab the students worked to translate the lines of their poems visually. Their engagement
with the assignment was evidenced by their choice to repeatedly revise their image choices and their work to divide the lines in their poems so that they appeared on the screen in ways that created both meaning and impact for viewers. For example, one student chose to present a list of phrases in her poem so that parts of each phrase appeared individually on the screen; this choice developed a momentum for that segment of the film as each phrase built on the one before it. Her original line read, “I want to go to college, but what if I don’t get in?” For the film she broke the line at the comma, so on the screen, viewers experienced the line as two parts: an assertion on one screen (“I want to go to college.”) followed by a question on the next screen (“But what if I don’t get in?”). She continued splitting her lines in this way, creating a rhythmic parallelism in the film. This decision allowed us to talk with her about how parallelism operates as a rhetorical device in writing and its effect on an audience.

After creating the drafted versions of their films, we asked the students, as they revised, to consider the kinds of details that might affect the audience’s experience of viewing the projects. We focused especially on the significance of timing and coached the students to read the text of their poems aloud as they revised and to make decisions about the length of time it might take readers to comprehend the lines before moving to the next image or line. This emphasis on timing highlighted the importance of audience awareness. We also introduced the students to copyright-free music sites and taught them how to download a “soundtrack” that fit the mood and tone of the poem. Perhaps not surprisingly, given what research suggests about the potential power of adolescents’ interaction with digital tools, the students pushed themselves in ways that were uncharacteristic of the work they had been doing in their English class throughout the year. They struggled with the elements of the assignment, but they also persevered. And they worked with significant focus to produce a film that they felt interested in and proud of. One of the students wrote in her notes about the project when asked to reflect on her experience of making the film: “This was different because we never did anything like this because our class can’t handle it.” The student’s perception of herself and her peers—that they could not “handle” a complex literacy assignment that asked them to think deeply and produce quality digital projects—attests to the difficult experiences of the class throughout the academic year, which had led them to view themselves as “troublemakers.” The evidence of their work on the “transpoemations” contradicts that perception. Given a provocative poem, a challenging assignment, access to technology tools, and support that allows for success, the students proved themselves both capable and committed.

At the premiere event that concluded the unit, the students introduced their projects to their peers and a group of teachers and administrators whom they had invited to the event. Their enthusiasm for the work they had done was evident, as was their clear understanding of the process they had engaged with as they moved from analyzing Lorde’s poem to creating original poems to translating their written text to a visual format. One student characterized the assignment as “cool” when asked by one of the administrators to describe the project: “You had to think on the spot. When you were done, you put a movie to it. This made it somewhat cool.” Other students noted the experiential nature of the project as compared to other English class assignments (“It was more hands-on”) and the enjoyment factor (“Making the poem was fun, but making the movie was even better”). Most telling, however, was the pride the students displayed as they explained the project to their guests and introduced their individual films. The contrast between the class session in which the students premiered their projects and the earlier session I had observed was remarkable. It served as a testament to the power of poetry, when studied from what Horine called the “outside inward” (making personal connections before we focus on the technical features of the poem), to engage even struggling students in significant ways.

Reflecting on the Implementation of the “Transpoemation Project”: The Conclusions

Jillian L. Wendt, in a review of the current literature about the modalities of literacy and the lack of basic literacy skills among secondary students,
suggests that “it is imperative that teachers consider the use of new technologies to assist in teaching reading and literacy” (43). We know that technology “can provide new and exciting pathways for students to demonstrate their mastery of a topic or concept” (Kingsley 54). It is important to note, however, that simply introducing digital technologies to students is not instructionally sufficient. It is necessary for teachers to integrate technologies within their classrooms that match the objectives they have set for student learning. Poetry, however, relying as it often does on imagistic and emotionally resonant language, invites us to consider the use of available multimedia technologies to deepen students’ understanding and appreciation. The process of translating verse from the page to the screen requires students to “solve new problems and employ creativity and critical thinking,” and to have multiple interactions with the poems they are studying and composing (Sadik 488). In the work on this project, for example, it was impossible for the students to create the film without significant re-readings of “Hanging Fire” and of their own poems. This iterative reading activity bolstered comprehension and facilitated interpretation. It is what Schmoker refers to as this “redundant abundance” (492) of thoughtful literacy activities that is a key to promoting achievement.

Works Cited


Toby Emert is chair of the Department of Education at Agnes Scott College, near Atlanta, Georgia, where he teaches courses in literacy, literature, and the arts. He can be reached at temert@agnesscott.edu.

64 March 2015