

Teaching to Learn: Creating Student-Led Workshops to Teach Poetry

Over the last decade or so, I have read a number of articles in which teachers deliberate on the efficacy of their pedagogical methods with regard to poetry and have heard colleagues often express similar concerns. Although I always enjoy teaching poetry, I have had a nagging suspicion that I was perhaps teaching for myself and those one or two very bright students who seemed to respond to every suggestion with a mirroring comment of their own. For the past two years, I have taught both a graduate course and an undergraduate course on modern and contemporary poetry during the fall semester. Because so many of the students in my classes were either already secondary teachers of English or were planning to become secondary teachers of English, and a few of them elementary teachers, I wanted to develop some methods of instruction that would engage the entire class and enhance their understanding in ways that would carry over into their teaching of poetry. Knowing that my own colleagues often felt ill at ease teaching poetry, I anticipated my students' trepidation teaching poetry would most likely be at least as acute. So I was particularly concerned with providing my students pedagogical models that would give them both greater mastery of the subject matter and an increased level of comfort teaching the subject matter—a feeling that they could do more than simply read a poem to understand it.

Added to what Mara Linaberger terms the “fear factor” many primary and secondary teachers encounter when teaching poetry was the challenge most of my teacher-students would soon face of teaching to a diverse student population, a population which might not always respond well to conventional instructional methods (366). As illustrated by Cheryl Rosen in her essay on pedagogy for diverse student populations, the responsibility that educators of new

teachers confront is complicated by what she terms a “demographic imperative” that involves students from diverse economic and racial/ethnic backgrounds (1438). The double difficulty of teaching poetry and addressing a diverse student population that my students would meet meant for me that I had to do more than merely introduce to them the general suppositions associated with modern and contemporary poetry and more than simply guide them through the process the of explication, hoping that they would comprehend enough to feel fluent when teaching their own students some dense modern poem.

Since modern poetry is so very difficult, as Gail McDonald writes in her essay “Hypertext and the Teaching of Modernist Difficulty,” “difficulty is an inescapable dimension of modernist texts,” I considered exploring the concepts of modernism and post-modernism through a poetry writing seminar (517). However, I decided a single seminar might be simply a diversion in the course of a semester, but a variety of seminars would, I hoped, allow the undergraduates to delve more deeply into the process and the philosophy of composition and the graduates to assess their deepening understanding of the texts in an instructional setting. Analysis of poetry is still my preferred method of instruction, but the juxtaposition of the construction and deconstruction of the same kind of poems would potentially uncouple my students’ fear of poetry from their expectation that poetry must be taught in a conventional manner.

The first year I taught the courses using the seminars the class sizes were ideal for some kind of graduate-led activity, dubbed a “poetry workshop,” conceived prior to the semester, and worked out with the graduate students in the first few weeks of the semester. In the past I had often had graduate students give presentations, either to their own classmates or on rare occasion to other classes I was teaching, but those presentations tended to be, on the whole, rather lackluster. That the graduate students perhaps had no good models for their pedagogy was an

obvious—and rather painful—explanation for their uninspiring presentations. After discussing the possibility of making presentations to the undergraduate poetry class with this particular group of graduate students, and soliciting from them an honest appraisal of their own past performances, I refined the workshop assignments so that a short, highly structured presentation with precise objectives would introduce a graduate-led workshop, meant to reinforce the ideas explained in the presentation.

In addition to organizing the assignment to minimize poor preparation and delivery on the part of graduate students, I knew we would have to contend with undergraduate responses that would begin with the discourteous but ubiquitous question, “Will this be on the test?” and end with at least one student (hopefully only one) slumped down in his or her seat sending text messages. A solution that would hone the pedagogical skills of the graduate students and have them comprehensively survey their subject while fully engaging the undergraduates meant for me turning over my undergraduate class to the graduate students—a terrifying prospect.

Since the graduate course had only twelve students and the undergraduate course had eighteen, I divided the graduate students into four groups of three and assigned them workshop themes. The semester had already begun, so we did not have the luxury of a great deal of time for discussion over what kinds of poetry would make the best workshops. Preparing my own instruction of the graduate class to allow for more discussion is one aspect of the process that I would change the next time around. The four schools that ended up being assigned were the Imagists, the Confessional Poets, the Beats, and the LANGUAGE poets. The choice of schools had more to do with where the groups fell within the semester than with any characteristics of the poetry. I chose the Imagists because they appeared early in the undergraduate course, so the first group of graduate students was, with my help and that of their classmates, able to create and

implement a workshop within the first month of the semester. Following this workshop, we had several weeks to debrief and discuss ways to improve the workshop model while the other groups spent time preparing for their workshops.

Preparation

The Imagist workshop preparation was rather frantic as we had only two weeks of preparation time for the graduate students to do their research and put together their presentation and workshop structure, handouts, and activities. The first—and to my mind most important—instruction that I gave was the caveat that the presentations should be concept driven. The presentations were to clearly articulate the concepts behind Imagist poetry, including examples from writings of practitioners of Imagism—letters, essays, manifestos, poems—and a succinct articulation of the theories of Imagism devised by the graduate student group. Part of the final presentation to the undergraduates would have to include a handout with a written summary of the ideas found in all of these materials. The written summary—and I repeatedly clarified that this was a summary not a full text of the presentation—should be followed by a number of short illustrations and excerpts from the primary research materials along with a bibliography of material that the graduate students used in the preparation of the presentation. The information in the bibliography had to be accessible in our library or on the internet. Requirements for the handout, in addition to those listed above, were that there should be no biography of the authors discussed (there was plenty of biographical information available in the textbook and the undergraduates were required to read the introductory biographies of related authors before the presentations), that the handout must have an outline of the presentation, and that it must include the text of any long quotations read during the presentations—in other words: it had to *be useful*.

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One of the most productive elements of the process in the Imagist workshop preparation was the discussion that took place in the graduate class once the students had completed a substantial portion of their research; they discussed how to sort, sift, and organize the information for the presentation and handout. There was a very flexible post-modern attitude toward information, a characteristic they recognized in a later discussion on the LANGUAGE poets. The group discussion, therefore, gave them the occasion to take into account a range of approaches to presenting their information. The members of the presenting group were responsible for finding as much information as possible, but I asked the other class members to come to the class meeting after the assignment was made with a general understanding of Imagism and one good source—defined as something more than a reference source, perhaps an interesting biography or a collection of critical essays or a journal article. The class meeting to which all of these materials were brought began with a short preparatory lecture by me. The previous week's class had ended with an introductory lecture on Imagism, so this class began with a brief discussion about teaching poetry.

The students in our program are all required to take at least one course in literary criticism, and many of the graduate courses center around the application of a literary theory. So we began our discussion of teaching poetry with a very basic, New Critical examination of poetry, but considered also other readings that might appeal to or be accessible to a variety of students. The pedagogical methods for applying these theoretical models would, of course, be very different for eighth graders than for graduate students. Since my students' experience as students was so far removed from their experience as teachers, I wanted to give them a host of possible pedagogies for bridging that distance. In addition to an overview of the conceptual problems, I offered the students a few examples of successful strategies from my own teaching

experience as well as a number of ideas found in reliable sources. I especially recommended the publications and website of the National Council or Teachers of English (NCTE). Since most of the graduate students already were teaching either high school or middle school English, they were familiar with the NCTE.

The best synopsis of these methods that I can offer is that they involve active student participation in the reading process. Almost any form of poetry reading involving students other than direct lecture allows some student participation, but the most successful—with regard to student's comprehension of underlying concepts and their ability to read poetry independently—are approaches that rely on activities giving students insight into the premises behind particular poems. Such activities might include creating a reader response journal that requires students to create a sort scrapbook of similar ideas and poems to the one being analyzed; writing a definition of a certain style of poetry and then having to choose from among a variety of poems those that fit that definition, making the connections with the definition clear; placing a poem in its historical context by reading a synopsis of historical events and then writing about how the poem may reflect a reaction to those events (e.g. "The Hollow Men"); or discussing a style of poetry and then writing poetry in that style to better understand the attributes of a particular style.

These examples were listed on a handout along with a fairly elementary rubric for arriving at a teaching activity. The handout that I gave the graduate students to assist with the discussion and preparation had the following information (in slightly less compressed form):

- Look first for materials that enhance your understanding of the topic.
- Organize those materials in an order that is logical for your comprehension.

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- Review the materials and select those that most succinctly explain or capture the essence of the topic.
- Consider the key concepts behind the topic.
- Express those key concepts in your own terms.
- Distill those key concepts into learning objectives for your students.
- Review the materials you have collected for illustrative examples of those key concepts.
- Consider how those learning objectives may be met with some of the pedagogical methods discussed (or others).
- Design an activity to meet at least some of your learning objectives in the time allotted.
- Review the information you have collected and the activity you have designed to see if it is appropriate for the target group.

In the period after the first workshop, I asked the students to evaluate the preparation process. They suggested that I illustrate one of the alternative teaching methods in a mini-workshop, replete with visual aids and handouts to give them more guidance. I am still not certain that I should follow that final suggestion—at least not to the letter. There is a fine line between giving students pedagogical models from which they can create their own teaching styles and giving them models which they will copy precisely to avoid the insecurity of the creative process.

Presentation

Since the undergraduate poetry class was a three-hour night class, time was not an issue. We were able to plan a presentation that would be followed immediately by a workshop. The presentation had to include a handout and a visual aid—PowerPoint presentation, overhead

slides, or other visual materials. The first presentation produced from this process—the one on Imagism—was a bit shaky. The students used a laptop and gave a PowerPoint slide presentation with eight slides. The first slide was the following quotation from Ezra Pound's "A Retrospect":

In the spring or early summer of 1912, "H.D.," Richard Aldington and myself decided that we were agreed upon the three principles following:

1. Direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.

Upon many points of taste and of predilection we differed, but agreeing upon these three positions we thought we had as much right to a group name, at least as much right, as a number of French "schools" proclaimed by Mr Flint in the August number of Harold Munro's magazine for 1911. (929)

The entire workshop centered on these three principles as the guiding principles of Imagism, although the presenters did acknowledge that there were other poets with competing definitions of Imagism. The other seven slides were a list of major Imagist poets, two poems—"In a Station of the Metro" and "Oread," a slide containing the presenting group's re-definition of Imagism, and three slides with instructions on how the workshop activity was to proceed. One of the complaints from the undergraduates was that they did not fully understand the concepts before they were asked to implement them, so when the last three groups prepared their presentations, they were much more cognizant of the need for adequate definition and explanation in the presentation portion of the workshop. The LANGUAGE poets group did a particularly good job with their presentation. They also used a PowerPoint slide presentation, but they were able to use

earlier class discussions of modernism, the Beats, the black Mountain poets, and the New York School to augment their discussion of LANGUAGE poetry. Admittedly, they had the benefit of seeing the difficulties faced by earlier groups and of having an established, shared body of knowledge that they knew the undergraduates could call upon, but they fully exercised this advantage. The presentation on the LANGUAGE poets also began with a quotation—that seemed to be *de rigueur* with all the groups—but the initial quotation was followed by an outline of the presentation, one that corresponded with the much more concise outline supplied in the handout given to the undergraduates.

The structure of the presentation reflected the very post-modern essence of LANGUAGE poetry and encapsulated the difficulty of teaching poetic “schools” when those schools are often defined by a assortment of individuals with diverse models. The presentation centered around a range of personalities that the graduate students had associated with LANGUAGE poetry—beginning with influences on the LANGUAGE poets such as Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams, early LANGUAGE poets like Robert Creeley, and including such poets as Ron Silliman and Charles Bernstein. Each poet in the presentation represented a distinct approach or the development of a particular outlook. The presenters showed a slide with either a short quotation from that poet about the concept or a brief paraphrase of that poet's ideas, followed by poems or excerpts from poems by that poet that illustrated the concept. At the end of the presentation was a recapitulation of the definition of LANGUAGE poetry as defined by the presenting group.

Handouts

The handout created by the LANGUAGE group was very closely tied with its presentation, which was one of the requirements of the assignment. Oddly enough, the Imagist

group's handout was more appreciated by the undergraduates, perhaps because it introduced some new elements that were not covered in the presentation while the LANGUAGE group's handout only provided a shortened version of the information discussed in the presentation. The Imagist group's handout included an extra four poems with short explications of the poems and quotations from *Blast* and Amy Lowell's "Preface" to *Some Imagist Poets*. The best handout of all the groups belonged to the group presenting on the Beat poets. This handout managed to outline the ideas in the presentation, provide illustrative definitions of Beat poetry, and allow early forms of interaction for the undergraduate students with the poetry.

The primary concepts of the Beat poets that the graduate students outlined were: open emotion, non-conformity/counter culture/alternative culture, open-form composition that was very image driven, and engagement with the chaos and spontaneity of life. Although the presentation and handout made reference to the central figures of the Beat generation—Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Allan Ginsburg—they also indicated that the poetry of the larger period from the late 1940's until the late 1960's shared many of these same elements. Since we had discussed the Black Mountain poets and the San Francisco Renaissance, the undergraduates were familiar with some of the connections that the presenting group was making.

The most compelling aspect of the handout was the page border, which was comprised of current pop-culture words familiar to the average undergraduate student. Through this border, the presenting group referred to counter culture ideas that might be applicable to experiences that the undergraduates had had. These words were carefully chosen to epitomize the primary concepts of the Beat generation outlined in the presentation. For example, the idea of engagement with the chaos and spontaneity of life was represented through a series of images of

a young woman moving into a dorm after evacuating from the Hurricane Katrina affected area (we are only a few hours north of the Gulf coast). At first the graduate students pointed out the associations between the words and the concepts, and then they asked the undergraduates to find the links. This interaction at the end of the presentation made the shift into the workshop activity fairly seamless.

Workshops

Once the workshops began the groups performed at about the same level. The workshops lasted a little over an hour. We broke the undergraduate class into small groups headed by one graduate student (the group coordinator), with usually three to five undergraduates per group and with the three presenters moving from group to group. The size of the groups for both the undergraduate and the graduate classes varied slightly depending on the class size and the level of difficulty I anticipated with a specific topic. With the workshops, however, the entire graduate class participated, even though only one group gave the presentation. The leaders for the workshops were the members of the presenting group, but the other class members took part as group coordinators. The specific tasks of each group varied based on the topic being addressed. Generally the graduate students took the groups through a few steps to prepare each of them to write a poem in the style being discussed. The steps were designed to help review the principal ideas of the school of poetry and might include some “test patches” or practice lines.

Once the undergraduates understood the concepts associated with the school of poetry, they were given a writing assignment and approximately twenty to thirty minutes to write a very short poem in the style that was being discussed. This task had to be presented to the undergraduates in either printed form or on the PowerPoint or overhead slide. Then the group would reconvene and discuss the poems—not the aesthetic merits but how closely each poem fit

with the style of the school or in what ways the poem provided innovation of the school that might be in keeping with the spirit of that particular approach to poetry.

Because we had so much participation in the preparation for the Imagist workshop, all of the class members were better prepared as group coordinators than in later workshops. They had spent considerably more time researching and discussing the notions behind Imagism than they did for the later three workshops, so when they were leading the writing workshops, they had greater mastery of the subject matter and therefore greater facility with the instructional aspects of the workshop. In later applications of this approach, I will try to incorporate more complete class participation into the preparation for the workshops. The role of the presenting group members was to set up each of the workshop groups, to make certain that each group had adequate support coordinators, and that they had either handouts with the assignment or a clear view of the PowerPoint slide or overhead with the assignment. Students preferred a handout with the assignment so that they could write on it or take it home with them for later reference.

The role of the coordinators then was to review the assignment and make certain that the undergraduate group members understood both the concepts that the presenting groups had been discussing and the assignment as it pertained to those concepts. The coordinators were to take the small group through a very brief group activity to practice the writing task and reinforce that the undergraduates understood the project. The practice activity for the Imagist group was to describe the sight of a favorite or least favorite meal or part of a meal from childhood in two lines or less. These lines must evoke an emotion other than disgust from the reader. The group coordinator gave an example that the presenting group had created: "Grandmother's hand placed the last half buried brown wafers/ circling the thick yellow creaminess as carefully as her brown

arms.” Banana pudding apparently had particular cache with the undergraduate students because they all understood the reference and came up with similar homespun examples.

Then they turned to their main assignment, which was to write a short poem that captured the emotion of surprise but that was primarily a description of a sensory experience. Unlike the practice activity, the poem was not limited in length nor did it have to represent an actual experience of the writer. The undergraduates were encouraged to brainstorm and write for ten minutes alone and then share their drafts with another group member before revising their poems for another ten minutes. At the end of twenty to twenty-five minutes, the small groups would reconvene and the students would read their poems and discuss how well their poems matched the three characteristics that the presenting groups had identified as the primary characteristics of imagism. The review of the poems was not meant as a critique of the poetic merits but as an evaluation of the undergraduates’ appreciation of the concepts of that particular school of poetry. The Imagism workshop had as its criteria for review that the poem create at least one strong sensory image and that when the listener reviewing the poem identified the emotion the poem was supposed to evoke that that emotion matched the one the writer identified as the one he or she was attempting to suggest.

The workshop on the Confessional poets also involved emotions; it was defined by the presenting group as “the ultra-candid dissection of private distress,” a definition which made writing similar poetry awkward even in the college classroom. The rubric for the practice assignment was to write a three to five line description of an embarrassing event that described the action of the event and the effect of the event on the writer. The presenting group had further specified the rudiments of Confessional poetry as the admission of guilt, the revelation of a secret, the expression of a deeply held belief, or the acknowledgement of a personal failure. I had

cautioned the presenting group as they prepared their workshop activity that the assignment would have to be specific enough to avoid any outcome that was embarrassing for the writer, the other group members, or the coordinator or that was in some way distracting from the purpose of the activity.

With that directive in mind, the presenting group discussed as part of their presentation the critical view of the Confessional poets as narcissistic, even quoting Sylvia Plath's comment on narcissism: "I think that personal experience shouldn't be a kind of shut box and a mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be generally relevant to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau, and so on" (231). What they came up with was an activity that required the undergraduates to write a short self-evaluation in verse of their own tendency toward narcissism or if they were unwilling to admit such, then their feelings toward any extreme narcissists in their lives. The main assignment was to be written in free verse with exploration of narcissism fitting one of the characteristics of Confessional poetry. This assignment also was challenging because the students were hesitant to criticize a poem that was personal in nature even if it did not fully meet the criteria of the assignment.

Assessment

As an instructional method, the workshops were successful enough that I repeated them the next year with some changes. I do not claim to have hard data about the quantity of information retained by my students using this method as compared to more traditional techniques. I have long agreed with the tenet of good teaching practices that "[g]ood learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated" (Chickering 4). My evidence is far more anecdotal than statistical. Seeing the graduate students lead the discussion and the workshops—knowing that they too were just learning that material—infused the

undergraduates with surprising confidence. At the end of the first semester that I used this approach, the undergraduates asked if they could create a workshop presentation portfolio as their final project, one aimed at high school students. The idea had been for the graduate students to practice implementing a different pedagogical model, which might serve as a model for the undergraduates to implement at some later date, far beyond my classroom. The enthusiasm the workshops generated, however, was great enough that the undergraduates wanted to test their own skill at designing a poetry lesson. For this professor, that is evidence enough that allowing students to teach one another about poetry can be an effective way to help them learn.

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Candis Pizzetta
Jackson State University