Poetry Doing Hard and Healthy Work: A Poetpourri of Ideas from the Maine Writing Project

Poetry can be powerful in countless ways. By incorporating music, technology, art, public speaking, and various other mediums of communication into the creation of poetry, the Maine Writing Project has developed novel ways of rekindling the passion for poetry with both educators and their students.

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Every summer for four to five weeks, a corner of Corbett Hall at the University of Maine is more alive than an ant colony on a sugar buzz as teachers share their lives, teaching expertise, writing, struggles, laughter, and—I have to admit—lots of great food. Though some participants drive in for each day’s work, many of us come from across Maine and live together in a dormitory. Sound like a sixties commune? Hardly, although we do share idealism and lots of loving. It is our Maine Writing Project Summer Institute, one of over 175 National Writing Project (NWP) institutes that take place across the world each summer.

I went through as a “fellow” in 1983, and I now direct the Maine Writing Project (MWP). Each summer, I am moved and transformed, and I see many other exemplary teachers outgrowing themselves—coming to new insights, stoking up their enthusiasm, extending and recommitting to their professional passions through the support and relationships that are offered during the institute. I have asked this summer’s fellows to help me report on something quite subtle and specific: How poetry ran through our institute in formal and informal ways. I’ve often thought about why NWP works so much better than any other kind of development activity I know. I think it is because instead of doing content per se, we do relationships. And all of the significant and substantive learnings we achieve come through our relationships. Poetry turns out to be one of the ways we relate, share, achieve, and highlight who we are and what we are learning. What happened in this past summer’s institute can serve as a model for the ways poetry can be integrated throughout our work with students and throughout our lives, both in and out of school.

Spontaneous Uses of Poetry

NWP summer institutes are different in some ways, but they all share these elements: 1) teachers teach other teachers by sharing their best practices, 2) teachers work together on their own writing, 3) teachers read, write, and inquire into professional issues of interest and importance. At our own site, we select and invite the widest possible range of participants. We think this energizes the group and allows teachers both young and “experienced,” teaching kindergarten through college, in subjects from literacy to math, to share and learn from each other. This past year, we had several young teachers like Ryan Mahan sharing passion, positive energy, and idealism. But we also had many experienced teachers, including Leonard Hooper, who will be entering his forty-eighth year of teaching this fall. Leonard shared that “I tried to retire three times, and I can’t do it. I intend to live to be a hundred and to teach the whole way.” Inspiring? Yes.

The ritual structures of our institute include daily activities, like hosting for the day. Each day’s hosts provide an Opening Moment and a Closing Coda for our work. These can be cartoons, video clips, songs, but most often turn out to be poems. It is amazing how we learned to love several new poets through this kind of sharing, and how well the poems match the themes of our reading and study. I imagine that having students search for poems connected to a curricular
theme would assist them to read a lot of poems and to see how many great ones are out there on every possible topic!

Another set of activities involves getting to know each other. This year, seventh grade teacher Averill Lovely organized an activity called Theme Song. Participants brought in a song that expressed something very important about them through music and lyrics. Averill burned these songs onto a CD (okay, a boxed set of three CDs) for all of us to take home. Each of us wrote liner notes explaining how the song summarized something important about our lives, who we were, or who we were striving to become. We shared these during lunch and on our retreat to much whooping and occasional dancing. Yes, poetry can be fun.

Averill reported that as successful as this activity was for us, it is even better in his classroom. He builds on this activity by having students choose theme songs for literary characters, figures or forces from science, or for authors or books. As students justify their choices, they are relating personally to characters, citing evidence about main ideas and themes, and having a good time sharing their musical tastes.

MWP takes over a section of the University of Maine education building each year, and we create a literate space with a pendumbra of poetic passion. We put up a poetry wall, post poems in the hallway, bathroom stalls, doors, and even in our food (on one memorable occasion we ate fortune poem cookies). We have book tables and pile up our favorite books of poems and books about teaching poetry so others can browse through them. This year our fellows created posters of favorite songs and CDs with brief reviews. It would be easy for middle schoolers to do the same.

Our co-director Carol Lavine and teacher Ken Martin shared their work on NWP’s Rural Voices Radio project. For this project, teachers from several middle and high schools across the state worked with all of their students to write both prose and poetry about what it means to live in Maine, their sense of place, and their experience being “Mainers.” An anthology of student work was created entitled First Light: Writings from the Maine Sunrise. When it came time to record their readings for the radio show and CD, we hosted a full day of writing workshops at the University of Maine on topics from poetry writing and proofreading to writing the college essay.

The resulting radio show has aired on our local PBS station and other local outlets. Our CD is entitled Rural Voices Radio II: Writing About the Places We Call Home and is available from NWP at www.writingproject.org. Given how easy burning CDs has become, several of our teachers are planning to make their own CDs of student poetry, publish class anthologies both electronically and on paper, and find students some local radio air time to present the results of their writing or inquiry and social action projects.

Sharing Our Talents
Each year, we are amazed by the multiple talents of teachers—talents for comedy, visual art, music, and a variety of other pursuits. Because of the nature of the institute, these talents are shared for the benefit of the group, and we discover many things about our colleagues that we never knew, sometimes after years of knowing or teaching with them! Music is always a talent that is shared throughout the institute. Our musicians often lead us in song or even write songs about our experiences. Writing or parodying songs, creating videos of poems, or performing songs that have to do with unit themes or current events are similar possibilities for kids.

Throughout the last ten years, my own middle-schoolers and I have performed jazz or other music and poetry concerts for Christmas, Martin Luther King Day, or to celebrate the end of units. These often public performances are created and orchestrated by my students, and our Christmas program has become a staple of the holiday season in our small community. Other middle schools could easily do the same. These are the informal ways poetry was spontaneously infused throughout the institute. But poetry was also a staple of our formal structures and activities.

Poetry as Part of Our Work
Each year, fellows begin the institute by sharing their autobiographies. We challenge our participants to find a unique way to tell their story through an alternate form of composing: delving into multimedia, cartooning, creating musical collages, or some other creative composition means that is new to them. Though people often compose extensive autobiographies and seem to very much enjoy this work, we ask them to share only a ten-minute segment with the rest of us so that we can experience everyone’s work.

This year, there were several iMovies (software available from Apple), and all of
them used theme songs, background music, and/or poetry as part of the movie. Many things can be taught about poetry through the creation of such movies: tone, coherence, transitions, etc.

Several folks wrote multigenre pieces, which of course provide an opportunity to experience and discuss the expressive power and possibilities of poetry vis a vis other genres. Leonard Hooper's was stunning. Surrounded by his own and his students' artwork, he literally told the story of his long life in photographs, poems, and song. In another unique presentation, Carol Levine's autobiography combined letters to her daughter with poems, songs, bills, and public service announcements.

After our fellows get to know each other, they choose permanent writing groups that continue to meet during the next year at our follow-up programs and sometimes beyond. We introduce a variety of ways writers can support each other in their group work. Participants are asked to complete two highly polished pieces: one creative and one expository. Each participant has about fifteen pages of anthology space in which to publish whatever pieces they deem best. Many poems are published, along with short stories, artwork, and other compositions. Publication beyond the anthology is not required, but our fellows find the support they are given in writing groups so encouraging that many do submit for publication. We have had five books and some breathtakingly beautiful poems published out of our writing project over the last six years, as well as a board game, a plethora of journal articles (like this one), op-ed pieces, and a variety of other useful documents (like grants). Publishing, our fellows report, makes them "way cool" in their students' eyes. A classroom anthology or website is obviously a great way to easily publish student poetry, but some students may wish to submit for publication in teen zines, poetry contests, and other places. Like our fellows, if they have the inclination, we should encourage them to do so.

**Sharing Our Expertise: Teaching Demos from Our Fellows**

The uncontested centerpiece of any NWP summer institute is the teaching demonstration. Fellows enact a successful teaching practice with all of us in a ninety-minute workshop. This sharing of expertise is astonishing and hugely influential. This past summer, for example, I redid three of my undergraduate methods units based on what I learned from these demos and was inspired to write a new unit for my incoming sixth-graders. One teacher reported that she had completely reconceived her whole year's curricula around inquiry as a result of two teaching demos she experienced during the summer.

Topics of demos run the gamut; many are sure to be about reading and writing poetry, and many use poetry to address curricular themes or to abet the study of particular writing processes. Valerie Shina's demo centered on how to use poetry to teach public speaking. She explained how she used classroom coffeehouses followed by a public poetry cafe to give her sixth-graders experience in delivering their poems, choral readings, and jokes, or to serve as play greeters or emcees, in addition to other interrelational speaking skills. Jamie Heans showed us how he uses student created "Inferential Movies" to assist students in making inferences and reading subtexts in poetry and drama. Students created short clips dramatizing sections of text and explained relevant poetic devices and how they worked in these particular poems. They then dramatically recreated and filmed both literal and subtextual meanings from a poem or scene. Literal recreations were often performed with subtitles in order to display characters' thoughts or deep textual meaning that had to be inferred.

Larry Loring presented on how he uses jigsaw poems, asking groups to decipher a stanza or part from a poem and to guess how it fits into a larger poem. As students share their stanzas, interpretations, and inferences, they are asked to put the poem into what they believe is its original order. They can then compare the various versions to the order of the actual poem and discuss how different constructions lead to different meanings. This is a great collaborative activity that helps students to focus on how poets make choices that affect meaning. Students read poems together and create a collage that illustrates the topic, the key details (or events), and the deep meaning of the poem. The visual work acts as a prosthetic device for visualizing, for attending to details, and for understanding how details work together.

As students move to writing their own poetry, Larry likes to make the writing/thinking process more visual and available to his fifth-graders by making it more concrete. By "going live" and creating a poem before their eyes, they share in the journey. They begin by brainstorming, using this raw material to write a group poem. This usually leads to false starts, which demonstrate that it's okay to "go back to the drawing board" when you fall short the first time. We all learn to look at the process as a challenging puzzle.

Eventually his students write their own poems, with lots of help from him and student writing groups. The final step is publication, and Larry adds a twist by asking his students to illustrate their poems and to create motif borders out of art paper. These activities help them to identify the topics, key details, and themes of their own
poems, which are mounted on their frames of pictures—photos, drawings, Internet shots—that relate to the poem, thus creating a gallery.

Sharing Resources
Another ingredient of our MWP recipe is sharing resources. Our fellows are often inveterate collectors of poems and teaching resources. They have shelves, folders, and posters full of these. Our institute is a chance to share these resources so that other teachers can benefit from them.

In this spirit of sharing, Janet Nordfors shared four books that have better prepared her (and now the rest of MWP) for teaching poetry. The four books she recommends here are extremely useful, teacher friendly, and to the point. Just what the doctor ordered for the busy lives of teachers. The first book is Scholastic’s Teaching Third & Fourth Graders to Love Writing Poetry by Regie Routman (2000). Although written for younger students, Janet finds it useful for teaching middle school. If you’ve never taught poetry before or if your poetry lessons need inspiration, Janet says this is the book for you. Her favorite feature of the book is the student models. First drafts, in children’s own handwriting and complete with cross outs and spelling errors, is presented on the left-hand page while the final published piece with illustrations and fancy fonts is presented on the facing page.

Another book Janet uses extensively is How to Write Poetry by Paul Janeczko (Scholastic, 1999). This wonderful little handbook is perfect for anyone hoping to become a better poet. She has had students read it cover to cover as a nonfiction choice with a great deal of success. It could easily be used as homework by a student who may be out of school for an extended period. Janeczko provides many student models and a wide variety of activities that are not only helpful to teacher and student, but also lots of fun.

Janeczko is also the author of another Scholastic book Janet likes called Teaching 10 Fabulous Forms of Poetry: Great Lessons, Brainstorming Sheets, and Organizers for Writers (2000). If you’ve ever needed a quick-fix lesson plan, you’ll want to keep a copy of this book on hand. The lessons and reproducibles are clearly laid out and very easy to follow. Janet keeps a couple of them in her substitute folder. Janeczko provides step-by-step plans to scaffold your students through the poetic process. This method minimizes student anxiety about writing poetry and before they even realize it, they have a finished piece. It’s almost as if the poem sneaks up on them from behind, and suddenly they are poets.

One more title Janet says should be on every teacher’s must-read list is Love That Dog by Sharon Creech (HarperCollins, 2001). Janet read it to us at the institute and commented that “This is the most touching book I’ve read in several years. If you’ve ever had a boy resist poetry—and who hasn’t—you need to read this book. It is a very quick read, and you will want to read it again and again. Creech has given all teachers a gift in this book. Read it; you won’t be disappointed.” All this sharing and support filled our souls with fire for teaching. That filling of the soul is what the Maine Writing Project is about, and what poetry is about as well.

JEFFREY D. WILHELM is currently an associate professor of English at Boise State University, Idaho. He founded the Maine Writing Project, where he has been the director for the past seven years, and is now working on founding a new site at Boise State. He is the author of eleven books. His latest are “Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys,” coauthored with Michael Smith, and Action Strategies for Deepening Comprehension.

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