

Chapter 7

Exploring Poetry from Around the World

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Why choose poetry?

Poetry as an artform has always earned notoriety for its exclusivity. Historically, it was the form that found patronage in the noble courts while prose was relegated to be most suitable for the gentlefolk. Although such hierarchies have dissolved over the centuries, and the poetic tradition has undergone numerous revisions in terms of style and access, it still stands out in the modern literary world as a form that feels more elusive than its prosaic counterpart. Readers are a lot less likely to pick up an anthology of Maya Angelou's greatest works over Agatha Christie's many thrillers in a time of leisure. The situation is also quite worrisome when we look at the rigid ways in which poetry often finds itself represented in school curriculums, and the limited opportunities that learners get to meaningfully engage with the form.

Evidence suggests that poetry can be a great medium to study the linguistic and conceptual components of a language. It has also been linked with improving fluency and comprehension for elementary students³. Accounts from high-school educators have listed poetry to be an effective tool to build speaking and listening comprehension skills⁴, which can be especially useful in ESL classrooms. Studying the composition can also help readers get a grasp on precise diction and various literary devices. More importantly, poetry can be a rewarding medium to delve into self-expression. Given these priors, exploring the poetic form to make it accessible for the learners in an online setting seemed to be a venture worth exploring.

We were also motivated to explore a learning unit based on poetry using the SFS model as it brings together a flipped classroom space, extended lesson time and incorporates learning routines in the process, thereby keeping the learning space student-centric. Making room for student-led discussion, interpretation and exchange of ideas all can enrich the study of poetry.

Unit Vision

The vision behind the poetry unit is to take the students on a transcultural journey around the world through the medium of poetry. Each week, the students are introduced to a new theme—a certain emotion, a state of being, an angle of story-telling and responses to common phenomenon—which is then explored through the lens of three poets writing from different parts of the world. The idea is to create a space for the students to engage with the same topic from multiple perspectives, thereby allowing them to develop a more complex understanding of the content.

³ <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1046&context=gerjournal>

⁴ <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/04/why-teaching-poetry-is-so-important/360346/>

Another goal of the unit is to be mindful of making the portfolio of poets as diverse as possible. This is a key consideration to give the students a chance to engage with a variety of voices and contexts—from modernism to postcolonialism, from Maya Angelou to Agha Shahid Ali—without having to enroll in a literature class at a university. The focus is to capture the complexities of our world through the selection of poets. There is also the hope that through giving students opportunities to write and create alongside the exposure to such a variety of voices, the students will develop their own voice as writers and thinkers.

Branching from that strain, the final goal is to lean the unit heavily towards exploring different mediums of self-expression. The unit contains creations that fall under the broader umbrella of poetic expression but approach the process through different forms. This means making traditional compositions share the space with confessional writing, free verse, spoken word and even song lyrics. The hope is for the students to have a chance to explore their personal narratives in the final performance task in a voice with which they most identify. By sharing thoughts, ideas, interpretations and feedback over the weeks with a tight-knit community of peers, there is also an expectation to build trust and a sense of community within the class space, which should help the students to express themselves with greater freedom and vulnerability.

Unit Design and Challenges

The unit is designed while keeping access and relevance for the students as the central concerns. Seven themes were chosen for in-depth exploration:

- Identity and heritage
- Hope and healing
- Bilingualism
- Bittersweetness
- Discrimination, displacement and belonging
- Self-belief
- Humor

The chosen themes can be connected overarchingly to the reality of an adolescent ESL learner. While themes around identity, self-belief, bittersweetness and hope are more commonly associated with the experiences of a middle- and high-school student, other themes like displacement and migration are included to expand engagement with global concerns.

A key challenge here was to balance introduction to new forms and themes to push learners' thinking while retaining the element of relatability. Reflecting on my time working with first-generation ESL learners, one of the biggest struggles that often tormented my class of forty-five was to be driven to pick up a story with unfamiliar themes in the first place! The motivation would easily wear out if even after toiling through the tiresome business of deciphering sentence structures and grammar, they still could not fully grasp the narrative since it was twice removed from their reality. This unit hopes to address this by being mindful of the

poetic voices included, and through introspective questions that encourage the students to think closely about the relevance of the theme in their own contexts.

Going deeper into the design component, the unit follows the trademark flipped classroom approach, where the lessons are designed such that students read the assigned poems with guiding questions, along with brief author descriptions and any additional readings, or precursory learning opportunities before the lesson. The approach encourages students to build confidence in their own interpretation of the work. The main lesson is then designed with the objective to supplement the students' understanding by introducing additional complex, provocative or local-to-global centered questions for discussion, as well as additional resources, adding opportunities for students to further their thinking and better understand the stories intertwined with the pieces of poetry we are examining. The idea behind this component is to layer the students' understanding by drawing intrapersonal and interpersonal connections.

A core component of the design is the final performance task. The students, along with the instructor, develop a personal piece of writing over the course, slowly incorporating new information around poetic forms, literary devices and voice to explore a theme they feel closest to. The motivation behind creating this task was simple: to have the teachers actively take part in what they expected the students to accomplish. For the students, seeing their teacher go on the journey with them could be a great motivator for taking greater risks and expressing with greater authenticity and vulnerability in their original composition.

Lesson Excerpt

Theme: Identity and heritage

Objective: Students will be able to articulate the role of memory and shared traditions in shaping identity

Readings

Poet	Poem
Joy Harjo	Remember
Adrienne Su	Peaches
Li-Young Lee	I Ask My Mother to Sing

Guiding Questions

Remember	Peaches	I Ask My Mother to Sing
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Who do you think the poet is speaking to?● What according to you is the central message the poet wants the person to know?● Why do you think remembrance is so important to the poet?● What values is the poet associating with the idea of remembering?● After reading the poem, how would you interpret the African proverb “it takes a village to raise a child”?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● List two traditions that the poet’s family followed that interlaced their Chinese heritage with their suburban American life.● How do you think the poet feels about having these different traditions in her house? Support with at least one piece of evidence.● What can you say about the poet’s parents from the poem? What does this tell you about the experience of immigration?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● What role does memory play for the poet’s family?● Why do you think the poet’s mother and grandmother continue to sing at the end?● Why do you think the poet likes to hear the song even when it makes his mother and grandmother cry?● Why do you think the image of the waterlilies is important/relevant for the poem?

Lesson

Pre-Class

- Read the excerpt about the poet’s background then read the poem with the help of the guiding questions. Note your responses to the guiding questions as you read. (Note: For some classes we will withhold the identity of the poets, exploring students’ initial interpretations and impressions before examining background information about the poets - in certain instances, such a process helps prevent bias that may come with seeing the backgrounds beforehand.)

During Class

Poem Discussion

- Common reading of the poems. Which one stood out to the students? Why?
- What is common in the three poems? How do they differ?
- What stands out visually when you look at each of the three poems? Discuss how you can know the type of poem (sonnet, haiku) by looking at the length and structure itself.
- Review the role of memory in all three poems. How do the poets link memory and traditions with identity?
- Discuss the background of the three poets. Discuss why remembrance and heritage is an important theme for a Native American poet, a Chinese American poet and a Chinese-Indonesian poet.
- What is the role of memory for people who migrate from one country to another or from villages to the city?

Performance Task Discussion

- This is the first class when the students get introduced to the final performance task--creating their own pieces of poetry. The students, as well as the teacher, will ideate and flesh out a piece of poetry over the course run, culminating with a final presentation in the last week.
- Initiate a discussion on the themes that the students would like to write about and encourage introspection on the reasons why the theme is close to them.

Independent Work (homework)

- Think of a story that has been passed down in your family or a tradition that your family follows. What do you like about it? Who are the people involved in it? Write a small paragraph to describe it. You can add pictures or inputs from any family members if you'd like.

A Final Note- Defining Success

Success for this unit, included in **Appendix D**, should not be defined as absolute mastery over the poetic form. Instead, it should fall more into the realm of deeper critical engagement and an improved level of comfort and enjoyment with both poetry and the English language. Like any educational investment, it would be unwise to expect quick results or sudden paradigm shifts from a single unit. However, if at the end of the course, the students are able to take a step back and reason through a challenge from multiple perspectives, ask questions that signal deeper meditation on the theme, expand their avenues for self-expression, or if they are able to absorb the newer vocabulary or stylism into their own work, that should be a cause for jubilation.

But the best sign of success? Watching the learner reach for the dusty copy of Keats' odes or another book of beloved poetry the next time they find themselves with time to spare!