

## Poetry in Motion

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In 2017 I was a Fellow in UWW [Program for Community-Based Learning](#), designed to augment in students a “sense of social responsibility and citizenship skills” and to improve “complexity of understanding, problem analysis, critical thinking and cognitive development” (AACU, 2012, pp. 60-61). Because this program obligated me to integrate community-based learning (CBL) into an existing course, I chose to re-imagine my Children’s Literature curriculum. This is a course required by every pre-service teacher seeking a license from Pre-K through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, so I have the potential to reach many students each semester.

When I undertook this challenge, I gave tremendous consideration to the notion of developing a *transformative* curriculum. The word means something different to most people, but I took it at its most basic definition and decided that my curriculum needed to change my students’ minds about something significant. On the first day of class, I asked them to define “literacy.” They generally agreed that it is the ability to read and write. One student added that it should include comprehension. Another suggested that the definition should include speaking.

Of utmost importance to me as a Literacy professor is that pre-service teachers embrace the importance of instructing a diverse population of learners by offering a wide variety of best practice methods and learning spaces. Thus, it is crucial that they broaden their understanding of Literacy, to recognize it as a social practice rather than merely a set of skills (Au, 1993; Heath, 1983; Gee, 1996; Pérez, 1998; Street, 1984). I impress upon them the importance of understanding socio-cultural theories of language and literacy (Cazden, 1988; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Erickson, 1984; Ferdman, 1991) so they understand that literacy is more than simply being able to “read, write or speak.” In other words, I explain that literacy is more than decoding or encoding, more than being able to

handle a set of discrete and technical skills (e.g., knowledge of letters, words, sounds) and more than “possessing” the cognitive capabilities necessary to engage with a text (e.g., attention, motivation, or memory abilities). Instead, the overall context of the situation shapes what it means to be literate, depending upon the type of text, the type of reading or activity expected with that text, and the identity or background of the reader. Finally, I offer that a socio-cultural perspective both emphasizes the social worlds and cultural identities of students and views the act of making meaning as always embedded within a social context, very often within structures of power.

This framework suggests that the ways in which teachers and their students interact is a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants. The structure of power in the traditional classroom, for instance, impacts the ways that children develop literacy learning. I offer this lecture to the pre-service teachers in my Children’s Literature course each semester, but I had never demonstrated the possibilities when the structure of power in the classroom is disrupted. I wanted to confound their traditional notions of how and where literacy may be taught and to alter the structure of power in my college classroom. In an effort to extend my pre-service teachers’ classic notions of what it means to engage students in literacy learning, I moved my classroom outdoors onto the Ice Age Trail.

UW-Whitewater rests within the Kettle Moraine Forest and is surrounded by miles of the Ice Age Trail. More than 12,000 years ago, much of Wisconsin was covered by ice, and as that ice receded, it left behind a variety of unique landscape features. The Ice Age Trail, one of only 11 National Scenic Trails in the United States, is a 1,000-mile footpath that highlights these features as it winds its way throughout the state.

In order to help my pre-service teachers understand, utilize, and value this outdoor classroom, I partnered with Wisconsin’s Ice Age Trail Alliance, the non-profit organization that builds and maintains this vital resource. Through this

partnership, my students learned from botanists, geologists, conservationists, erosion experts, and a variety of multi-generational outdoor enthusiasts as they learned how to build and maintain the trail, as well as how to utilize the trail as an outdoor classroom. This trail can be accessed throughout the state, so it is very likely that they will have access to this most amazing outdoor classroom whether they remain in this community or move across the state.



Students learn how to use trail building tools



In exchange for this educational windfall, my students each devoted 15 hours of service to the Alliance. Some completed a weekend-long boardwalk-building project alongside hundreds of other volunteers. A small group, dubbing themselves the *Trailblazers*, hiked several miles of the Whitewater segment with an Alliance sponsor and painted blazes on trees to mark the trail. Others worked on an erosion project on the trail just beyond our campus. Several led Tyke Hikes for children around the community.



Students worked on boardwalk project near Eagle, Wisconsin

Finally, each created a multi-disciplinary literacy unit to be shared with the Alliance's education outreach program, which reaches teachers, parents, and students interested in working on the trail with young learners (see Appendix A for the assignment guidelines). These multi-disciplinary units were rooted in literature and spanned the content areas of Math, Science, Social Studies, History, Art, and Health.

The pre-service teachers in this CBL course explored the Ice Age Trail as an outdoor classroom for an entire semester and created lessons that integrated literacy across all disciplines. Their understanding and use of Children's and Young Adult literature provided the framework, and their experience of learning in this non-traditional space informed their lessons, as they began to imagine different ways of reaching children. It seemed that, while they have each learned about the importance of implementing best practices and the necessity of differentiating their instruction, they struggled with the idea of putting the theories learned in the classroom into practice. I suggest that this was due, in large part, to their limited definition of literacy. When they began to understand

that the learning spaces and methods that they choose for young learners will help to shape a socio-cultural context for their students' understanding (Pérez, 1998, p. 5), they started to imagine ways in which they could offer experiences that recognized the background knowledge and social/cultural identities that children bring to a learning activity. Slowly, they began to fully understand that literacy learning happens, not just by reading and writing, but also through conversations, interactions, and relationships with teachers and peers. When they began creating the multi-disciplinary literacy units that would eventually be shared throughout the community, I could see in their work a transformation from a traditional to a more holistic view of literacy.



Hike and Write poetry activity

I titled one of the activities *Poetry in Motion*. We met for class at a walking bridge on a segment of the Trail near our campus, where I read excerpts from Jane Yolen's poetry. We discussed the idea of having elementary age students collect *Small Moments* or images to use as writing prompts for poetry, and I explained that they would practice this themselves in order to understand how they might use this type of activity with their own students. I offered two different options for the assignment. First, I gave each pre-service teacher a *Small Moments*

journal, made simply by folding four lunch bags in half and securing them at the binding with twine. I used small Velcro circles to close the open ends of the bags to create pockets for little treasures, and I printed a label for the cover of each. I explained that students could collect *Small Moments* by finding artifacts along the trail to put inside the pockets, or they could write about these moments in the journal. The other option was to capture the moment in a photo. Afterwards, they dispersed along the trail to hike and write poems about their *Small Moments*.



By re-imagining my Children’s Literature curriculum, I learned what may happen when the power structure in a collegiate classroom is disrupted. It was not, as every teacher may secretly fear, anarchy or chaos. It was the first truly collaborative experience that I have had with students. When we moved our classroom onto the trail, students who were typically quiet suddenly came to life. We sauntered along chatting and laughing, and, at a point, I don’t believe an observer would have been able to distinguish the professor from the student. We were just a bunch of individuals hiking, writing, reading poetry, and laughing.

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## Appendix A. Assignment Guidelines

The following poems will comprise our “Poetry in Motion” curriculum. The idea behind this study is that students will complete a variety of poetry activities while they enjoy the beauty of the universe ... outdoors. The use of the outdoor “classroom” offers us an opportunity to flip the classroom: students who typically do not excel in a traditional learning space may thrive here. Our hope is to offer students opportunities to observe and enjoy the nature around them and to leverage the power of poetry to describe it.

We shall begin with **Haiku**, because it is a very easy form for children to understand and create. Haiku is a traditional form of Japanese poetry. Haiku poems consist of 3 lines. The first and last lines have 5 syllables and the middle line has 7 syllables. The lines rarely rhyme.

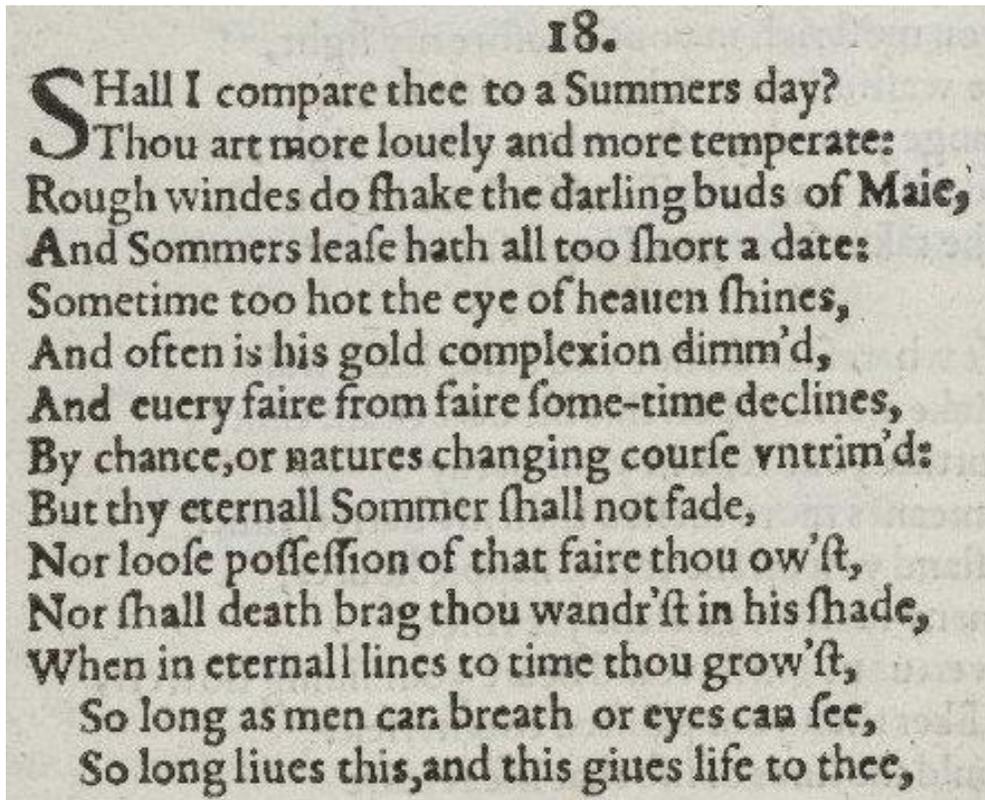
Here’s a Haiku to help you remember:

I am first with five  
Then seven in the middle--  
Five again to end.

Palm trees shoot so high  
Mountains reaching to the sky  
Sun on my face...sigh

**Sonnets** are far more complex; however, because they offer a rigid rhyme scheme, they are sometimes fairly easy to create. Students think of a topic and then simply follow the scheme. Sonnet comes from the Italian *sonetto*, which means “a little sound or song.” Traditionally, the sonnet is a fourteen-line poem. Two sonnet forms provide the models from which all other sonnets are formed: the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean. The second major type of sonnet, the Shakespearean or English sonnet, tends to be easier for students to create as it has three quatrains and a couplet and follows this rhyme scheme: abab, cdcd,

efef, gg. The couplet offers students a chance to be clever as it plays a pivotal role, usually arriving in the form of a conclusion, amplification, or even refutation of the previous three stanzas.



**Free Verse** is a perennial favorite because of its complete lack of rules. It is a literary device that can be defined as poetry free from limitations of regular [meter](#) or [rhythm](#) and does not [rhyme](#) with fixed forms. While they do not follow regular [rhyme scheme](#) rules, they do provide artistic expression. In this way, poets can give their own shape to their poems. However, free verse still allows poets to use [alliteration](#), rhyme, cadences, or rhythms to get the effects that they consider are suitable for the piece.



**Illustrative Poems** solve one of the biggest problems that writers have as they set out to create a poem ... coming up with an idea. Students may simply “caption” a picture that they have taken on the trail. This caption may be joined with others to form a poem, or perhaps the young writer will add to the caption as inspiration strikes.

Winter closed its icy doors,  
allowing joy only to the hearty.



**When I grow up**

I will be graceful, funny and smart.

I will always be happy,  
because I followed my heart.

I didn't listen to friends  
who said I was weird.

I didn't run away  
from the things that I feared.

I will stand up for the weak  
and give them a voice.

I will be a great leader

if given the choice.  
But for now...  
I will glide.  
I will stop, spin and start.  
Living each moment, everyday,  
with a smile in my heart.

***I Am poems*** express who you are by sharing personal characteristics and qualities. There are a couple different types. The first is a formulaic type, basically a fill-in-the-blank poem. There is also the free verse version where the author takes the basic idea of the *I Am* poem and runs with it. Either is just dandy, as long as the poet represents themselves. A fun twist is to create *I Am* poems to describe famous people in history. Students can have fun guessing who is being described in the poem.

We will practice the strategy of collecting *Small Moments* as inspiration for our poems. I have created journals for this activity and will share them at the trail. Students will each receive a journal to collect their moments, or they may take pictures of the moments they wish to capture. Students will then use the collected *moments* as a starting point for a poem.

“Home of the One Thousand Heart Beats”



Light filters through the citadel  
And through her song, she does compel.  
The traveler to walk through her domain  
A place touched by wind, snow, and rain.  
He must be surefooted-  
To walk through the city wick and wooded.

He is on mission true  
To escape the gray, and find the blue  
To clear his lungs of fog, the smog, and the black hazardous emission,  
To walk the trespasser's walk of careful contrition  
He walks and walks, trying to hear the sound  
Of all that is around  
The sound of just one  
Just one of those one thousand heartbeats to pound.

His feet crunch  
On the carpet of a million shreds.  
Of green life once known to touch the endless blue  
He thinks he is almost through  
The honking, hollering, and the hullabaloo.  
He has almost shrugged the tangled threads  
That hold him to the flashing lights  
The endless sights  
The concrete elites  
And escaped to the home of one thousand heartbeats.

The muck underneath  
The blue above.  
The sparrow, the songbird, and the dove.  
Soar above the scurrying rat, the scuffling mouse, and the scavenging squirrel  
The wolf, the fox, and the deer from their dens unfurl  
As spring's warmth seeps into the branch and touches the leaf  
The wind whispers through the trees  
And hears and sees  
The life among the death  
The light in the dark  
The evil in the good  
All in this small wood  
This small park  
That holds its breath  
And the one thousand heartbeats  
That the traveler has yet to hear

The traveler begins to fear  
All that he cannot hear.  
Has he been so long in the noise and commotion  
That the sound of his own heartbeat has become a forgotten notion.

Then he begins to hear-  
The pounding, the thumping, so loud and clear.  
Just one of the one thousand heartbeats that reside here.



The sweet trickle as the water flows,  
The radiant glow from below,  
Even the stones have a home  
in the bed of the water's foam,  
It is like a marvelous dream,  
When studying the ways of the stream.

### *Ice Age Trail Poem*

Crisp dews reflect yellow hues  
I can feel the sun shining through me  
The grass shifts under my toes  
As I walk the path guided by thousands before me

*bugs fly in my eye  
this hill seems to touch the sky,  
mud seeps into my shoes  
lost in the woods, we don't know whose.*

Wander somewhere not far from home,  
a separate history to us unknown.  
Ice came and went but left a path,  
for us to learn from, for it was made to last.  
The sights and sounds of the forest  
are there to amaze and never bore us.  
Rain or shine, hot or cold,  
explore the trail to see what it holds.

Bugs.  
Lots of trees.  
Very quiet all the time.  
Grass, leaves, weeds, vines.  
Green is everywhere.  
No cars, no trucks.  
Lots of trees.  
Rivers,  
Streams,  
Bugs,  
Birds.  
Life,  
silence,  
nature

**Who am I?**

I am tall  
and change colors in the fall.  
When the wind blows,  
I do not shrink.  
Instead I grow.  
The rain does not scare me.  
Instead it feeds thee.

Between the Evergreens,  
birds chatter through the day.  
Children run full of life.  
Air is light, roaming free.  
Life moves a bit slower.  
I want to spend more days  
between the evergreens.

Rain patters  
wind blows  
leaves whistle  
Rivers flow  
Sun shines  
We know  
It's mother nature  
putting on a show.

The trees so tall, they touch the sky  
branches sway, as birds fly by  
I wonder how the world would look  
if nature wasn't forsook

**Trees are brown  
Trees are green  
This is the calmest place  
I have ever seen  
The sun is glistening  
through the trees  
just feeling the breeze**

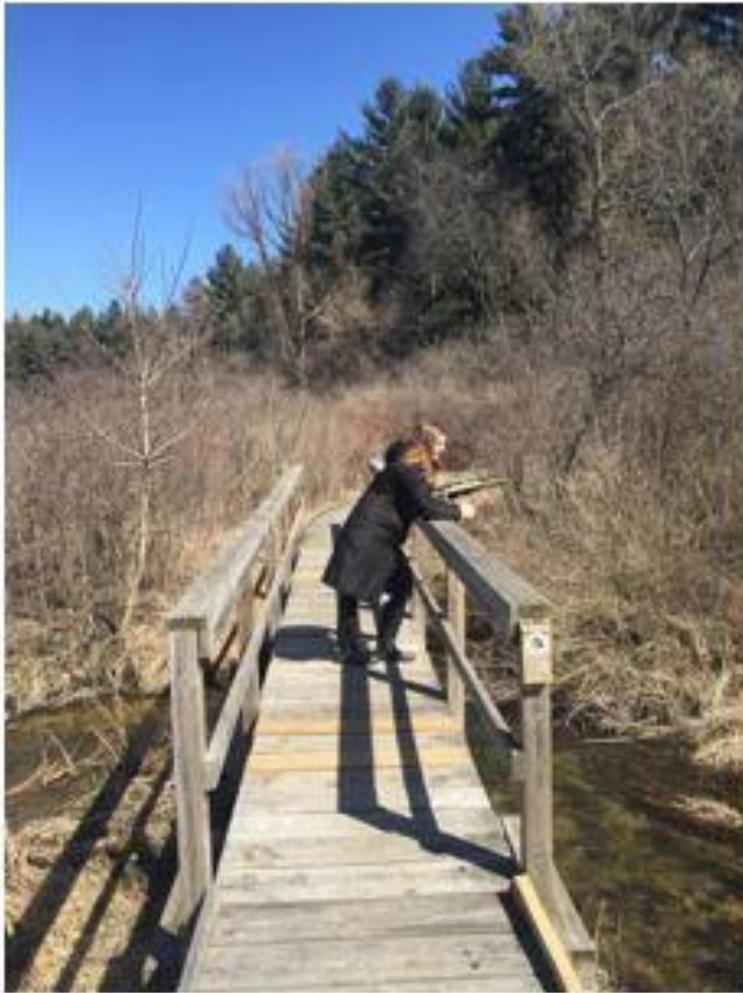
**H**owling of the wind making the  
**I**ncus, Malleus and Stapes working to  
**K**ee up with the sounds.  
**I** see the leave twisting and turning.  
**N**eedles softly covering the path.  
**G**reen ferns turning red and  
**T**rees casting shadows.  
**H**ear pumping and muscles straining.  
**E**yes ever watchful for the elusive woodland creature.  
**I**mprints of the Earth  
**C**arefully setting into the soul.  
**E**arth, sky, air, and water  
**A**geless in its purity  
**G**ently soothing my spirit.  
**E**nergy coming to me egging me on.  
**T**aking a breath feeling the burn in my lungs.  
**R**eleasing my worries and fears.  
**A**llowing the peace and tranquility to come  
**I**nto my mind  
**L**earning to love the wilderness and accepting its gifts.

Oh the trees  
How green they are  
They are so big and tall  
They sway left and right  
If only people would look up to see their beauty

Go ahead and get lost  
Because there is no cost  
To witness the beauty  
Of what the outdoors has to offer



Here's a strange plant called skunk cabbage  
Sensitive and easy to damage  
Grows only where soil is moist  
When found, be sure to rejoice  
Finding one is somewhat a challenge.



## INSPIRATION "BRIDGED"

There once was a student from Whitewater,  
Who needed some nature for brain fodder.  
So she went for a hike,  
On feet! No car, no bike.  
To a bridge where inspiration finds her!