

Because Student Voice Promotes Equity in the Classroom

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Abstract. The authors explore how poetic inquiry, used within their own multicultural education classroom, models ways in which secondary classrooms can incorporate poetry to explore and process current events.

Educators in pluralistic classrooms are frustrated, guarded, and exhausted from addressing complicated current events with their students, especially since the 2016 election. Basing classroom assignments on headlines is not only difficult but scary; however, in the tumultuous political climate of today's America, the ability to provide a community where students are free to express their voices reinforces cultural and political literacy and ensures an inclusive classroom environment.

In my classroom, I utilize the writing of poetry as a mechanism for self-expression, political debate, and controversial conversations. These assignments not only require students to understand current events, but also to explore their opinions of the world around them. While many teachers may shy away from partaking in discussions of these issues, I find that poetry allows students to discover their own voices while simultaneously exploring complex terrains of political discourse. These student-written poetry assignments encourage students to think critically and contextually about current events and how they pertain to their own unique experiences.

“So, what?”

During my years creating high school English, speech, and debate lessons, I always asked myself, “so, what?” What does any topic matter to someone with different lived experiences than mine? Lessons are not worth teaching if they do not allow for students to learn and develop from a position that is meaningful to them. The classroom should be a place where those of all religions, races, and socioeconomic classes can learn through the prism of their own experiences, while being introduced to the viewpoints of others. Poetry pushes students to move beyond regurgitation of facts and figures and into a process of developing their own unique voices.

My students, both in high school and in college, remind me of the poet, Steve Colman: “I wanna hear a poem / I wanna learn something I didn’t know / I wanna say ‘yes’ at the end, / because I’m sick of saying ‘so?’” (Simmons, 2005, p. 3). It is this “so?” feeling that prohibits students from thriving academically in any classroom, while simultaneously and systematically excluding diverse voices from being heard. When students fail to see a personal connection to a lesson or fail to see how a piece of literature matters to them, they stop paying attention, and with good reason. They lose their voice in the classroom, turning their literature studies into meaningless text devoid of the humanity, which we as English teachers want our students to appreciate.

The Difference is Context

In my multicultural education courses, we focus on social justice conversations that make many educators nervous: race, socio-economics, gender, sexual orientation, religion, citizenship, and ability. These issues scare some K-12 educators, too, since “the phrase ‘teaching for social justice’ may conjure images of facing off against opponents or carrying protest placards while marching in the streets” (Kelly, 2012, p. 151). However, many high school literature pieces commonly studied provide a natural platform for these discussions to take place without feeling forced or inappropriate. For example, conversations about racism arise organically from Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* or Gaines’ *A Lesson Before Dying*. Why is it we can explore and discuss

these societally relevant topics in the context of required readings, but not in current events?

Furthermore, as educators, is it not our job to bridge the context of literature into our students' lives? If we do not allow students to link today's events to what we are reading in canonical classics – if we fail to make those connections – we hinder student voices. Poetry focused on current events allows them to discover and understand their position(s) on issues, which leads to increased engagement and ownership of their education and individual beliefs.

The Possibilities of Poetry

Inevitably, every semester a first-year teacher candidate (TC) asks, “why haven't we ever talked about these things before?” I look around the room at many heads nodding in agreement. While these future educators have studied racism through a historical lens in high school classes, they indicate they have never spoken about systemic oppression and privilege, or had deep discussions about contemporary racism. This suggests a lack of current events discussions and/or correlations with mandated curriculum in their schooling. If students never discuss issues of social justice, identity, and oppression inside the classroom, we are not providing equity for our students who live these issues outside the classroom.

While I have the luxury of including poetic writings in my university classroom, I am aware poetry gets a bad rap in PK-12 classrooms. I know many English educators who do not even like poetry – as it is often rooted in archaic language and texts – burdening educators and students already facing too many curricular demands. My hope is to challenge teachers opposed to curricular-based poetry to reevaluate and attempt current events-based poetic exploration as a platform for social justice and student self-actualization.

In order to promote these values, I ask TCs in my multicultural education classes to write poetry regarding current events, giving them the flexibility to write from their perspective and style. Thomas (2015) offers that “school with less poetry is school with

less heart. School with no poetry is school with no heart” (p. 92), and I am consistently encouraging future teachers to find their hearts. Instead of forcing upon them structured argumentative essays, which identify barriers to systemic oppression or analyze the complexities of sexual identity, I ask TCs to write their ideas poetically – which provides them with voice – on a current event or issue.

I find that students produce stronger arguments when they write or speak from their perspectives, not what they think the instructor wants them to regurgitate to earn an “A.” Coates (2015) offers that “poetry aims for an economy of truth ... poetry was the processing of my thought until the slag of justification fell away and I was left with the cold steel truths of life” (pp. 21-22). Here among these truths, the emotional underpinning of poetry as human experiences, students learn to make an argument; here among these truths, they find their voices.

Poetic Response to Current Events

During fall of 2017, as part of an ongoing research project to demonstrate this pedagogical strategy, I asked three TCs (who eventually co-authored this article with me) to write two poems each, offering insight into a 2017 current event. I chose TCs who plan to teach secondary English, and I gave them as much latitude in style or subject as they needed, only ensuring they wrote about current events. When they finished their poetry, I asked them to write a response explaining 1) why they selected the issue, and 2) why they felt it would be important for their future students to learn about each current event. As a result, the TC-written poems dove into the political turmoil over Civil War monuments and White supremacy in Charlottesville, the 2017 U.S. immigration ban, and aid for Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria.

These poems address complicated, multi-layered issues of politics, belief systems, religion, and perspectives of life. Giving TC-participants the opportunity to express themselves resulted in greater appreciation of difficult discussions that arise in pluralistic classrooms, which in turn creates “open classroom climates that empower students of all ages to engage with complex issues, stand up for their positions, and work to understand differing opinions” (McCafferty-Wright & Knowles, 2016, p. 117).

Moreover, I engage these difficult discussions with my college students now, as I did with those in the high school classroom, because student voice promotes equity in the classroom.

Neutrality Is Not an Option

Max, in his first year of education courses, explains his rationale for writing the poem, “Somewhere in Charlottesville”:

As a kid, I had heard the stories of racist groups, but I never thought of them as *real* people. To me, they were ethereal, used only to show the epitome of prejudice. I wrote this poem because I had to wrestle with a new reality. When students learn about current events like Charlottesville, they must learn that neutrality on this issue is not an option. If we do not show students that these monsters are real, we cannot expect them to stand and fight when those same monsters rear their heads.

“SOMEWHERE IN CHARLOTTESVILLE”

Somewhere amidst the cosmos,
Through blackness and through eons,
There sits a younger me,
Who is not afraid of demons.
Somewhere beneath the steel gaze,
Of men who fought for tyranny,
Lies a dying woman,
Mowed down before she'd flee.
Somewhere in an echo chamber,
A man hears “Heil” and cheers,
Desperate to spread his message,
And aroused by the world's fears.
Right here in this moment,
My blood has curdled like milk,

Are these men simply lost and uneducated,
Or monsters frolicking in their filth?
Somewhere in my skull,
My synapses and neurons wage war,
The boogie man has shown his face,
Stepping into daylight from lore.
Now I look toward heaven,
Angst no smile can conceal,
One day that younger me will find,
The monsters he fears are real.

After watching Vice News' episode "Charlottesville: Race and Terror," Max explained that the "poetry assignment pushed me beyond memorization and regurgitation of statistics and into a critical analysis of my beliefs and opinions." This analysis is felt in the emotional details that shaped his poem. He furthers, "this process incited me to advocate for the awareness of racism in this country, and the suffering that comes from writing such evils off as dead and gone."

Who is an American?

In "Lady Liberty's Change of Heart," a second-year TC, Kyle, sets the context of his poem:

An executive order at the beginning of Donald Trump's presidency barred people from seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States for 90 days, refugees for 120 days, and barred Syrian refugees indefinitely. For a nation often known for providing aid to other countries in times of need, this was a step backward for US diplomacy. Many of the countries included in this ban face war, famine, or even genocide, and an order like this might prevent the escape of many innocent people and families. Many people come to the US with the aspiration of living comfortably and safely – so what sort of message

does it send to Muslim citizens when our president says, ‘we don’t want them here’?

“LADY LIBERTY’S CHANGE OF HEART”

Who put a stop sign in Lady Liberty’s hand?
Once, a beacon of hope for those looking for a better life
Escaping famine, war, and genocide
One last chance at survival and prosperity.
What was once a graceful face to welcome the World
Turned sour at the words of a bitter man
Who told her she need not help these people
For they cause more harm than good.
And now she stands in New York Harbor,
Shooing away those desperate souls,
“For they’re too dangerous,” she says,
“We don’t want them here.”

In response to immigration bans, Kyle explains that “Poetry grants us the ability to not only share what we think about current issues but also showcase our passion for a given topic. Anyone can spew out an essay full of facts and statistics, but you’ll never find the same voice or passion that you would find in a poem.”

...And Other Types of Injustices

After writing the poem, “Oh, Mr. President,” a third-year TC, Lizzie, offered that

Political tensions have peaked following the 2016 presidential election, leaving no race or age demographic unmarred by the current societal climate. The White House has attempted damage control, trying to remind the nation through outreach efforts that we are all Americans, and if we stick together, we can achieve anything. However, when Hurricane Maria devastated the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico, these

messages did not seem to apply. Youth have empowered many social movements and will continue to do so. Therefore, discussing current events such as this one are not only relevant but necessary, to keep students informed of who is in need in our country and how we can help.

“OH, MR. PRESIDENT”

Oh, Mr. President,

Did you think it was enough?

To bring us lights and cameras

And toss rolls of paper towel into a sea of desperate faces

Devastated by the path of a ruthless Maria

Then hit again by the wake of your disregard.

Oh, Mr. President,

Have you forgotten your purpose?

To protect, love and serve

The people of this “great” nation

Who lost electricity and heartbeats

Lost our faith in the government

Who turned a blind eye.

Oh, Mr. President,

What did you mean?

When you said we

“Threw your budget out of whack”

When you said

“This is nothing compared to Katrina.”

Oh, Mr. President,

Do you find me greedy?

We may need resources but

Your wake requires more damage control

Than that of most other natural disasters.

Oh, Mr. President,

Aren't you my president, too?
My complexion and compassion
May differ from yours,
But can you really pick and choose?

Lizzie explains how using poetic inquiry changed her perspective: “Had I written about this current event in a paper for a social studies class, I would have read and reread my writing to locate and eliminate any potential tone of bias or distrust.” However, by utilizing poetic inquiry to investigate, Lizzie was able to “reflect... without muting my opinions - my voice –” which led her to “better understand what happened” and, in turn, further investigate “what can be done to prevent such an event in the future.”

Facing Resistance

I admit it: educators might face resistance from students when introducing poetic expression to dive into complicated topics. For many, the mere idea of getting their students to buy into poetry is a daunting task. However, TCs who tell me they are not poetic, “for whom poetry feels inaccessible” (Lahman et al., 2011, p. 894), are the ones who end up surprising themselves most. We start with writing poetry about ourselves; we write a privilege poem that evaluates our own lives before we imagine writing about others. Because “Poetry’s potential to offer a stimulating way of reflecting on our lives and the lives of others is great” (Foster, 2012, p. 753), I stress that poetry is personal and I cannot judge them based on what they submit. I can only expect sincerity, stressing that process is more important than product. When I build trust with my students, encouraging them to take risks, they produce brilliant works of art. Are all their couplets perfectly rhymed? No. Is every line of poetry perfectly sculpted and shaped? No. Do they find their own voice? Yes.

I embolden them to write what they want, with few limitations and an abundance of encouragement to take risks. This risk-taking accomplishes two goals: 1) it provides students room to fail; and 2) it allows students to say whatever they want about a topic. The power of voice in poetry provides a platform for self-discovery and growth,

while opportunities to say what they want fosters independence. These two factors together equalize the classroom, where each student partakes in difficult discussions on complex concerns.

The use of poetry to examine contemporary topics is not unique to my university classroom; these methods can also thrive in middle or high school. First, incorporating current events into a course, alongside mandated curriculum, aligns with expectations of listening and speaking in English language arts standards. Second, asking students to write poetry, rather than a full essay on a current event, allows for student voice to rise on an issue and not take too much time from mandated curriculum. Third, poetic expression encourages students to problematize ideas and concepts beyond the confines of their lived experiences, ultimately pushing them to define their own perspective of the world while still in school.

Practicality in the Classroom

When tackling curriculum, teachers often start with an idea, develop a plan, and negotiate their way through strengths and weaknesses of an activity or unit, and poetry is no different. Over the last few semesters, I have tried numerous ways to incorporate poetry in my classroom – some have worked exceedingly well, others have not. From those experiences, I offer a few practical suggestions for teachers wanting to use current events-based poetic exploration: 1) start small; 2) use your curriculum to explode a moment; and 3) be careful not to have students speak for – rather learn from – others.

First, there is no need for curricular redesign to add current events-based poetry into your classroom. For example, if your class reads Sandra Uwiringiyimana's *How Dare the Sun Rise: Memoirs of a War Child*, a warm-up would be to ask students to read current periodicals on the country's complicated discussion(s) regarding border security, refugees, and immigration. Instructing students to then write a haiku, limerick, or cinquain about what they have read makes a simple assignment. Whether you allow them to read poems aloud in class or not, this task of writing current events-based poems 1) reinforces the link between literature and today's political climate; 2)

prompts students to recall poetic structures; and 3) offers an opportunity for students to express their opinions without spending extensive class time on an assessment.

Second, specificity is key. I find when students focus on exploding a particular moment, line, phrase, or paragraph in a current event article, instead of trying to encapsulate the entire article into poetic form, they dig deeper into understanding implications of the news. For example, ask students to correlate Crooks in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and issues of race with an article about Black Lives Matter, or gender inequities associated with *Curly's Wife* and the #MeToo movement. Inspire students to focus on details rather than attempt to solve world problems within the confines of a poem. Specificity, I find in my classroom, promotes both appreciation for others and authentic opportunities for voice.

Moreover, it is important to ensure that students are not speaking for others, rather learning from them. This "speaking for" mentality could lead to increased frustrations, stereotyping, or even silencing marginalized voices. Rather, use poetry as a means to investigate what others may encounter in their lives. I have learned from my own poetic explorations that it is not beneficial to have White students speaking as if they are people of color, nor is it helpful for men to speak for women; instead, use poetic forms to explore how current events impact who we are, what we think, and how we perceive the world around us. Rooting poetry in published current events sources and/or pairing with corresponding curriculum prohibits these missteps from happening.

If our goal is a socially just classroom where every student feels free to express themselves, educators should create frameworks that allow risk and growth. As "creativity begets more creativity" (Felleman-Fattal, 2017, p. 72), students must explore strategies to interact with curriculum in a way that makes sense to them. Poetry addressing current events allows for students to make mistakes – tackling historical lessons of core curriculum – while simultaneously making connections to the realities of today. Equity in the classroom is promoted when sincerity is valued over quality; process, not product, is key; and learners are able to express ideas based on their own experiences, feeling free to explore without judgment.

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