



# Poetry Across the Curriculum: Four Disciplinary Perspectives\*

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Our “poetry-across-the-curriculum” (PAC) project at Clemson University began in the fall of 2000, one facet of our university-wide communication-across-the-curriculum (CAC) program begun in 1989.<sup>1</sup> In August 2000 our CAC program received unexpected national and campus recognition when Clemson University was awarded Public College of the Year by *Time Magazine*, and we seized that opportunity to launch an unconventional “Focus on Creativity” component to our program. The CAC program was established to improve student learning and communication abilities, and we used familiar CAC approaches to do so, suggesting journals, discussion boards, and peer feedback on multiple drafts of major reports, speeches, and essays. More than 500 faculty have participated in our program over the years, from attending and leading workshops to participating in CAC curricular change, service learning projects, laptop computer initiatives, research collaborations, publications, grants, and assessments. However, to suggest the writing of poetry as a way to

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improve academic learning and communication in the disciplines was new and seemed counter-intuitive to many faculty. As they understood it, writing in their discipline involved various kinds of expressive and functional writing, but not creative writing, and certainly not poetry. And just as certainly, they did not feel prepared to “teach” the writing of poetry, or to read it, respond to it, grade it.

We sent out invitations to thirty faculty who had been active and innovative in integrating CAC practices into their courses, and twenty-four agreed to participate in the pilot project: *Focus on Creativity: Poetry Across the Curriculum*. Faculty representing all five of our colleges and numerous academic departments agreed to ask students to write poetry in response to course readings and other content-related prompts. This ongoing (2000-2003) pilot project involves faculty workshops and informal luncheons; an anthology of selected student poems from each participating class; print editions of whole sets of poems from particular classes, such as biology, horticulture, music, and psychology; judging sessions by interdisciplinary groups of faculty; awarding “certificates of achievement” and book store gift certificates to selected authors; web publication of selected poems (<http://people.clemson.edu/~apyoung/focusoncreativity.htm>); and ongoing formative assessment. We began to assess the poetry project in 2001 using faculty surveys, student written reflections, textual analysis of student poems, and case studies of classes from four disciplines. This essay reports on the purpose and findings of the poetry project, focusing primarily on the four case studies.

The purpose of these poetry assignments was not to train students enrolled in accounting or zoology courses to become poets in any professional sense, but rather to provide them with opportunities for creative thinking and language use, for gaining new perspectives and generating ideas on the material under study, and for exploring feelings and values in conjunction with academic learning experiences. In addition, we have discovered pedagogical uses for the writing of poetry in this context: it provides a voice to some students who are shy about speaking in class; it provides a place for humor, playfulness, irreverence, and the expression of shared emotions; it recasts thinking about course material into new patterns; it enhances student-teacher and student-student communication; and it fosters an interactive classroom envi-

ronment. When poetry assignments are carefully planned, they strengthen course goals.

Our primary theoretical framework draws on our understanding of the poetic function of language as developed in the work of James Britton and his colleagues at the Schools Council Project in England (*Development*). Britton asserts that poetic writing involves a kind of learning different from the learning in transactional or functional writing. In many instances, creative writing is connected to creative thinking and problem solving, to alternative and innovative ways of seeing and doing.

Britton speculates that both the freedom and the discipline of the artist's perspective enable us to express our values. For example, when we assume the artist's role in writing, we write in what Britton calls the "spectator" role. Writing in the "spectator" role frees the imagination to reflect on experience and to engage language in such a way that meaning is shaped and reshaped by an active but disinterested mind (not as interested in pleasing the teacher, getting an "A," or other "business" concerns). Britton writes: "As spectators, we use language to contemplate what has happened to us or to other people, or what might conceivably happen; in other words, we improvise upon our world representation—and we may do so either to enrich it, to embroider it, to fill its gaps and extend its frontiers, or to iron out its inconsistencies" (*Language* 6). This activity is fundamentally different from composing transactional writing, the purposeful writing we do to "transact" the world's business in the vested "participant" role, that role in which we are actively or tacitly involved in persuasion (selling a product, changing a mind, influencing a decision, or participating in the making of knowledge in a particular discipline—such as a scientific research report or journal article). Students often attest to the "freedom" of writing poetically once they develop trust that the teacher is encouraging creativity and risk taking rather than judging their artistic ability. "I never thought about science that way before," students say, or "I was able to say what I really thought," or "there is no one right way to write a poem." Writing poems across the curriculum interrupts students' expectations for transactional disciplinary writing and frequently enables them to think in insightful and unconventional ways.

One goal of Clemson University's PAC project is to test these theories in actual practice by 1) describing the learning that occurs when students write poetry in the disciplines, 2) collaborating as reflective practitioners in developing the knowledge of teaching and learning, and 3) assessing the effectiveness of the project and developing a set of models for faculty and students throughout the curriculum. We are heartened by the 100% return rate on the survey of participating faculty, and the fact that in response to the question: "What's the chance that you will assign poetry writing in the future?" 19 of 23 (one respondent did not answer this question) responded "excellent" or "very good." However, our focus here is on the four studies of poetry writing in psychology, biology, literature, and humanities. Each study was written by the assigned teacher, and thus is informed by disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical context.

The four of us agreed on some simple guidelines for our teaching and subsequent research: to assign students to write at least two poems and at least one reflection on writing poetry over the semester; to explain the purpose of the assignment to students; to require that the poems be about relevant course material (often a specific topic was given, e.g., cloning); to encourage and support students' creativity (e.g., playfulness with language; risk taking; thinking "outside the box"); to read some poems aloud in class and in connection with course content; and to provide freedom for students to choose the form, tone, purpose, persona, and style of their poems.

Since our study is naturalistic, there are also variations in each of our approaches because of differing course content and goals. In this study, biology and humanities are general education courses, enrolling significant numbers of non-majors. Psychology and literature are advanced courses, enrolling primarily majors and minors. One of us graded the poems; three did not. Two of us published a class collection of poetry; two did not. One of us required that poems be on ethical aspects of the content; three did not. However, what surprised us as we collaborated in writing this article were not the differences in our approaches, but the similarities we discovered about how poetry worked as a tool to accomplish our course goals. In each of our courses, the writing of poetry enabled students to make personal connections to the disci-

plinary content under study and to view that content in broader social and cultural contexts.

### **Informed Empathy: The Challenge of Teaching a Course in Abnormal Psychology**

*Patricia Connor-Greene*

As faculty, we spend much time talking about how to stimulate our students' minds, but not so much on how to engage their hearts and senses. Encouraging collaboration of mind, heart, and senses can especially enrich the study of mental illnesses. Too often, the more a student learns about psychological disorders, the more tempting it becomes to replace an appreciation for the individual with disembodied "facts" about a disorder. In the process of learning diagnostic criteria, students sometimes transform a person into "a schizophrenic" or "a manic depressive," losing sight of the uniqueness of each individual. Ironically, it is interest in the individual that often draws students to the study of psychopathology, so it is especially important to find effective ways to integrate "objective" and "subjective" responses to people with mental illnesses.

My primary goal in teaching Abnormal Psychology is to increase students' *informed empathy*, blending knowledge about mental illness with an appreciation of its personal impact on individuals, their families, and those who provide their care. In addition to understanding factual information about diagnosis and treatment, I want students to imagine what it might *feel* like to have a mental disorder. The "informed" half of my goal is easy; Abnormal Psychology courses are packed with information. The real challenge is teaching empathy.

To address this challenge, I have incorporated poetry assignments into my Abnormal Psychology classes for the past three years. I gave minimal guidelines, asking students to write a poem from any perspective on any topic related to mental illness. Some students chose to write as if they had a disorder; others wrote from the standpoint of a family member or clinician. Students earned a small amount of credit for turning in a poem, but I did not grade the poems in any way. Because some students were apprehensive at the prospect of writing a poem, I assigned the poem for the next class period (two days later) to encourage spontaneity and minimize time spent worrying about the assignment. The resulting poems

demonstrated that along with fostering empathy, a poem allows students to create a brief but surprisingly rich snapshot of a complex idea.

In just 21 lines, Laurie Gambrell captured some of the most complicated and difficult obstacles therapists face: the struggle to maintain healthy personal boundaries while caring for an emotionally needy client, the threat of professional burnout, and the challenge of feeling (and instilling) a sense of hope despite setbacks.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Mental Health Professional**

**have you ever made cornbread  
watched the golden batter hit the hot  
skillet and ooze  
bubbling and slow to fill the pan**

**have you ever been frustrated  
felt it slide over your hot  
skin and ooze  
bubbling and slow to fill the core  
of you**

**i feel the oozing (is that even a real word?)  
it doesn't matter if it is or isn't or wasn't or couldn't be**

**because all i feel is the ooze  
the utter ooziness of the ooze is oozing**

**because i know that  
it doesn't matter if it is tricyclic antidepressants or  
lithium or benzodiazepines or  
chickenoodlesoup**

**because i know that  
it doesn't matter if it is four days or two weeks or  
thirteen years**

**because i know that She will be back  
in my office oozing her life**

**into my pan of golden cornbread**

Laurie not only demonstrates an extraordinary grasp of this therapist's ambivalence and fatigue; she invites the reader to empathize as well. By beginning with "have you ever made cornbread," she connects us to a familiar experience that engages our senses far beyond an intellectual discussion of therapy. In writing, "it doesn't matter if it is tricyclic antidepressants or lithium or benzodiazepines or chickennoodlesoup," Laurie raises questions about the long-term effectiveness of psychiatric medications, which in turn highlight the centrality (and the pressure) of the therapist/client relationship. Her use of the "oozing" imagery, "slow to fill the core of you," captures the insidious nature of therapist over-involvement and burnout. Laurie's choice of when to capitalize ("i know that She will be back") reflects the therapist's struggle against loss of self and the enormous emotional burden that a therapist may feel. This poem so effectively communicates the complexities of the therapist/client relationship that I will share it with future Abnormal Psychology classes. I found that a two-day deadline gave the students enough time to produce thought-provoking poetry.

On the day students handed in their poems, I asked them to do a five-minute freewrite on their reactions to writing the poem. Students' written responses to the poetry assignment supported its effectiveness in increasing empathy. One student wrote that the poetry assignment was "a unique way to kind of put yourself in another's shoes. So many times we just hear the 'name' of a disorder and we don't actually take time to understand what the person's life may be like." Another wrote, "Doing the poems really makes you think about the person with the mental illness, not just the mental illness." Once I saw the impact that poetry writing could have on students' ability to empathize with clients, I made poetry a more integral part of the class.

I decided to use poetry to replace another assignment, a site visit report. As part of the course requirements, every student in the class makes a "site visit" to a mental health treatment facility. Some students visit a clubhouse program for adults with chronic mental illnesses; others go to a state inpatient hospital or participate in the Walk for Mental Health Awareness, along with mental health center patients and staff. In past semesters, I have asked students to write a site visit report describing the facility, the staff, and their own reactions to both the setting and their perceptions of their

experience. Although I encouraged students to write subjective responses, their site visit reports tended to be rather sterile accounts of their visits, providing relatively little sense of what the student thought or felt. To encourage students to reflect on and express both their expectations of and reactions to mental health treatment facilities, I replaced the site visit report with an assignment of two poems, one before and one after their visit.

Jack Berno wrote “Schizo” in anticipation of his visit to an inpatient psychiatric hospital. He read his poem to the class with a rapid-fire, rhythmic beat that gained momentum as he read, mirroring the pressured speech typical of a manic episode. He doesn’t just “talk about” mental illness; he takes us on a wild ride that gives us a *feel* for mania.

### **Schizo**

**It's a panic  
To feel like  
You're on a hallucinogenic  
24/7  
doctor diagnosis is schizophrenic  
with a hint of manic  
depressive  
I'm a maniac  
Doesn't take a brainiac  
To realize that it hits you  
With no planned attack  
Missin' deliveries  
To me like a baseball player  
With a fanned at bat  
Sucks to be psychotic  
Only friend  
Is your narcotics  
Far from exotic  
Or erotic  
My body's normal  
When it's always toxic  
The disease  
People mock it  
Suicidal thoughts  
I try to block it  
Give me a gun  
I'd cock it**



**Maybe the voices in my head  
Just talk it  
Insaneness is movin' in  
Actin' like a hooligan  
My man down the hall  
Just ate his poo again  
See my family  
I'm like  
Who's this man?  
Beatin' the wall  
Threw fists and  
I'm blue again  
Want my mental  
Bright as the light  
In the sky  
On the 4th of July  
Boomin' in  
Celebration  
I want to reason  
Went from high school grad  
Makin' A's and B's in  
To a mental house  
People lookin' at me  
Always teasin'  
Life is cold, far from pleasin'  
I'm always freezin'  
Just want to settle  
In a sunny meadow  
Clear sky  
Flowers bloomin' in  
The season**

Jack is clearly “informed;” his words and rhythm demonstrate an excellent grasp of the clinical features of mania such as flight of ideas and loose associations. Yet this is no sterile clinical description. Jack’s character has a distinctive voice that is clever, irreverent, and frustrated. He wants us to know how his life was (and could be). We get a feel for the *person*, not just the illness.

Using one of the most effective strategies to create empathy, the poem reminds us that mental illness can affect anyone (“Went from high school grad / Makin’ A’s and B’s in / To a mental house”). Jack’s choice to make the character young and bright challenges stereotypes of the mentally ill and in-

dicates a willingness to identify with him rather than cast him as “the other.” Like Laurie, Jack makes the unfamiliar familiar (“like a baseball player / With a fanned at bat”) and in doing so, invites reader empathy. And like Laurie, Jack uses a fictional character’s voice to assume Britton’s “spectator role.” In Britton’s words, both Laurie and Jack enrich, embroider, and extend their ideas using the language of poetry.

Writing poems about mental illness encourages informed empathy, providing a forum for students to combine factual knowledge about psychiatric disorders with an appreciation of the uniqueness of an individual person. Most students wrote poems from a persona different from themselves, and attempting to see the world through another’s eyes is the essence of empathy. Along with fostering empathy, the poems provide a fresh, creative way for students to demonstrate mastery of the course material. Both Laurie and Jack demonstrate a poem’s ability to distill complex and emotionally charged topics into relatively few words rich in sensory imagery.

I will continue to assign poems in my classes: students surprised themselves, and they surprised me. Often, the students who were least involved in class discussions wrote the most vivid and insightful poems. Poems give students a different voice than they typically have in psychology classes, and they give me a new way to listen.

### **Making Science Personal: Poetry in a Biology Class**

*Jerry Waldvogel*

Why should a biologist use poetry as a teaching tool? More than one colleague has asked me that question. Before I answer, consider the following observation from *Science for All Americans* by Rutherford and Ahlgren:

What the future holds in store for individual human beings, the nation, and the world depends largely on the wisdom with which humans use science and technology. But that, in turn, depends on the character, distribution, and effectiveness of the education that people receive ... without a scientifically literate public, the outlook for a better world is not promising. Most Americans ... are not scientifically literate. (v)

Now shift to recent headlines. Miss Cleo, the popular TV psychic, goes to trial on charges of false advertising - seems her Tarot card predictions do not come true (Bean). The makers of the Ab-energizer, that effortless tummy exercise gadget, are charged with deceptive marketing practices when users find that the product is not only ineffective, but actually dangerous (Hager). And amid much public squabbling by his children, the body of the late baseball legend Ted Williams is cryogenically stored, based largely on the scientifically unsubstantiated claim that the slugger might one day be revived when medicine has advanced sufficiently (Cohen). These examples give credence to the claim that many people are indeed functionally illiterate when it comes to the everyday application of science to their lives.

To improve science literacy, classroom instruction must not only focus on high-quality content and pedagogy, it should also get students to appreciate that a working knowledge of science helps them make more informed personal and social decisions (Biological Sciences Curriculum Study vii; National Research Council 3-6). One way that this can be achieved is by giving students opportunities to make meaningful personal connections between science and other ways of thinking that they typically perceive as “non-scientific” (e.g., philosophy and ethics). I have found that writing poetry about biology and its relationship to other aspects of our culture is an effective way to help students develop personal connections with science, because poetry allows them to step out of their traditional “participant” role as science writers and adopt a more personalized “spectator” role. Poetry thus frees students to use their imaginations, giving them the opportunity to express connections between ideas in ways that are not possible in other, more traditional written formats (e.g., term papers or exam essays). By allowing students to shift their perspectives in imaginative ways, poetry encourages critical thinking.

The General Biology class in which I have used poetry at Clemson University has about 20 students, roughly half of whom are science or engineering majors. Most claim little or no facility with poetry when the class begins, and almost none have used creative writing in their previous science courses. The idea for making formal poetry assignments in this course came from an unexpected poem that I received from one of my students in response to a take-home essay

exam question. Although I expect and almost always receive answers to these questions in academic prose, in the Fall 2000 semester Maureen McHugh wrote her answer in poetic form. The question asked the student to interpret the following short poem on the scientific process by J. Brooks Knight, and to explain why it was a good statement of the philosophy that all careful scientists should bring to their work:

**Say not that this is so,  
but that this is how it seems to me to be  
as I now see the things I think I see.**

The following are the first three stanzas from Maureen's seven-stanza, untitled poem in response to Knight's words:

**The goal of good science is to understand  
Nature, the universe, the law of the land.  
But science has certain rules by which one must abide  
So the results gained are truly justified,  
And on its own the outcome can clearly stand.**

**The behaviors we see once are not always true,  
For reliability we must observe other examples too.  
True science depends on validation,  
A quality achieved by replication,  
So we must test a hundred times, not just a few.**

**This is why we cannot just say "this is so,"  
After a million times we still do not know.  
For science is not in the market to prove,  
It wants only that which is false to remove,  
And allow valid ideas the room to grow.**

At the time I had no prior experience with poetry in my teaching, but Maureen's limerick-like poem got me thinking about the potential that writing poetry has for enhancing student learning. Not only did Maureen show me that she had a thorough understanding of the mechanics of the scientific process, she also demonstrated that she had internalized and personalized this process and could draw creative analogies to everyday experience using rhymed verse.

Intrigued by what Maureen had done, I decided to make writing poetry a more formal part of my course in the 2001-02 academic year. I asked the students to write poems on six

different occasions each semester. This time I assigned specific topics such as exploring the nature and limits of science, defining life (including where it begins and how it came to be), counseling a friend with a serious disease who might benefit from the results of stem cell research, considering the ethical dilemma of using humans as research subjects, examining drug addiction from the perspective of a user, doctor, or friend, and pondering the myriad implications of animal cloning. I gave students free rein in terms of poetic format, setting only a minimum limit of ten lines, and asked them to focus more on feelings, perceptions, and the interface between science and society as they saw it for the topic, rather than just the empirical “facts.”

All of the poetry assignments were graded, and together totaled 15 percent of the final lecture average. I did not attempt to judge the literary quality of the poems themselves, largely because I wanted the students to concentrate on personalizing the science and developing new perspectives, but also because I did not feel qualified to critically evaluate their poetry as such. My grading criteria were thus basic spelling and grammar, scientific accuracy, and evidence of both critical and creative thinking.

Two examples from the 2001-02 class serve to illustrate the personal connection to science that emerged from my students' poetry. Emily Hertzog's poem “First Murder” was written after a class discussion about the serious ethical problems associated with a long-term medical project known as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which ran from 1932-1972 (Allen and Baker 164-169). In this study, poor African-American males in rural Alabama were convinced to participate in a project to investigate their “bad blood” in return for the government's covering regular medical checkups, meals, and funeral expenses. In reality, the doctors were interested in monitoring the unchecked progression of syphilis in the black population so that they might better understand the natural pathology of this disease. As if this lack of informed consent (some would say deception) was not reprehensible enough, when antibiotic treatments for syphilis became available in the 1950s, participants in the study were not made aware of this new medical advance so that the “scientific objectivity” of the study could be maintained. Using history as her guide, Emily's poem put the emotional issue of ethics and research

on human subjects in a more modern context. Excerpts from her poem follow, with ellipses indicating missing text:

**This morning I killed a man.  
I was the doctor on duty-  
watching as he gulped-chest heaving-for his last  
breaths of air.  
He was lying on the ground when I walked in today.**  
...  
**Our motto: “To better the lives of all mankind”  
seemed strangely inhumane all of a sudden.**  
...  
**Four years ago we began researching AIDS.  
Still a virus without a cure, it was our idea that we could  
make further developments toward such an end by  
studying the disease in detail.  
The only way to objectively do such was to watch men  
like Big John die.**  
...  
**I myself was the one who suggested we withhold the  
drugs.  
My blindness! My failure to see!**  
...  
**How many more will come? ... Oh God, what have I done?  
This morning I killed a man.**

What impresses me most about Emily’s poem is the raw human emotion juxtaposed with the emotionless understanding that proper scientific protocol is essential for medical research. This linkage demonstrates that Emily has wrestled with the needs of science and their social implications. In the midst of this emotional tug-of-war, Emily focuses on the tension between the physician’s credo of “do no harm” and the need for unbiased knowledge of a disease (part of which can include human suffering). The obvious angst felt by the storyteller as she struggles with the personal consequences of her research beautifully illustrates that Emily has forged meaningful connections between our class content (the importance of scientific precision) and the ethical ramifications of that content as it relates to research on humans. Indeed, during my thirteen years of teaching biology at Clemson University, I have never seen this kind of emotional connectivity between content and ethics emerge from a standard essay or term paper, making me think that working from the “spec-

tator” role when writing poetry gives students a better way to personalize science.

A second poem from the 2001-02 class takes a more tongue-in-cheek view of another controversial topic in biology, the issue of cloning. After lectures and discussions on the theory and practice of cloning, including how an uninformed public can hysterically misinterpret the potential dangers of this technology, Jennie Kill chose to further explore this idea in her poem “Geneticists on Parade”:

**Cloning is not something that we should be afraid of  
All of the unfounded fears, when analyzed, seem quite  
stupid  
Women will eradicate men (don't push it, boys)  
We will be the same, and wear the same silver jumpsuit  
(genetic fashion *faux pas*)  
History's hated will be recreated and wreak havoc (neo-  
nazi genetic scientists)  
The clone will be subjected to undue stress (having a  
supermodel's body is such a drag)  
The clone will be a deviation of nature, a soulless freak  
(someone tell *that* to Luise Brown)  
Scientists will create animal monsters that will kill us  
all (Ahhh! Attack of the super lactating cow!)  
Now really, is there such thing as a mad scientist?  
A crazy genius plotting in his basement laboratory  
To create the ultimate killing machine from some  
dinosaur DNA and paper maché?  
Ignorance gives rise to irrational fears.**

I like this poem because it shows how a solid understanding of science provides a useful counterpoint to the public (mis)interpretation of science. When compared using Jennie's parenthetical style, “what is” and “what might be” are seen as the products of different, yet interconnected worlds of objective analysis and personal interpretation. Her humor, exaggeration, sarcasm, and playfulness also make the poem fun to read. Jennie's poem shows clear evidence of understanding our class discussions about the unlikelihood that malevolent despots will clone new armies, or that dangerous organisms such as super-lactating cows will soon appear and take over the planet. The imagery also extends to examples that Jennie found in her personal research on the topic (e.g., the reference to one of the first successful test-tube babies,

Luise Brown, who critics suggested would grow up to be some moral abomination due to the process by which she was conceived). This connection to examples beyond our classroom discussion suggests a high level of critical thinking on Jennie's part, and points to her desire to formulate a complete personal picture of this topic. From poems like these, it appears to me that my students are learning to make well-reasoned personal judgments based on what both science and ethics have to say about a controversial topic. The ability to retain scientific information in its proper context, and to see links between science and the political or social agendas of various special interest groups, is an extremely valuable lesson for students to learn.

When asked to reflect on how they valued their poetry-writing experience, my students expressed an almost universal enjoyment, with many indicating that they had learned a great deal more about science from this process than they had thought possible. Many had initially doubted that poetry, which they perceived as an emotional commentary on life, could accurately portray the fact-laden nature of science. Over time, however, most came to recognize the numerous links between science, ethics, morality, and other issues, and that science as a human construct cannot be viewed independently of its social context. A number of students commented that they would never again look at a "scientific" issue the way they used to (i.e., isolated from "non-scientific" factors in life). Their comments also revealed an understanding of the importance of critical thinking, since the poetry writing assignments required them to consider important issues in science from a novel perspective.

To return to our original question, why *should* a biologist use poetry writing as a teaching tool? For me, the answer is simple. We need better science education, and a growing body of literature shows the value of using language arts to help students build connections between science and society (Century *et. al.*, 37-49). I now add poetry writing to the list of valuable linguistic tools that help students construct meaningful scientific knowledge in a social context. Poetry allows students to step out of their usual role as participants in scientific endeavors and to become broad-thinking spectators who develop personal perspectives on science and its connection to other areas of human enterprise.



## Learning about Literature by Writing It

*Art Young*

When I teach a literature class, students are required to write poetry in response to the literature they are reading. In asking them to do so, I have eight goals for students: 1) to experience literature as producers as well as consumers; 2) to read poetry carefully and imaginatively; 3) to gain new understandings and perspectives about how poetry works; 4) to develop a personal connection (feelings and values) to the literature they are reading; 5) to pay close attention to the possibilities of language; 6) to express voice and to make discoveries about their own voices; 7) to behave as writers serious about the writing they do; and 8) to surprise themselves, each other, and me.

In spring 2002, I taught “The Romantic Period,” a course devoted to British writers at the end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth. After we read selections about slavery and the slave trade, including narratives by former slaves Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince, students wrote a poem in response. A particularly effective and engaging example is this poem by Tara M. Hanshaw.

**interracial**  
**strong sable hands,**  
**luminous white smile like**  
**in my third grade textbook**  
**(black face-rags-crosshatched back)**  
**the green eyes he borrowed**  
**from that white man with the whip**  
**lifetimes ago,**  
**the man that (beat) (raped) owned**  
**the ghosts that still dwell**  
**in those eyes-**  
**so forgiving of my flesh (so pale)**  
**and of my father's forbidding nudge**  
**and silence,**  
**the hard stares of strangers**  
**(colors don't mix)**  
**pointing fingers, good ole boys snicker,**  
**flags flutter in the southern winds-**  
**but the warm hugs from his mama**  
**who lets me call her such,**  
**the acceptance of his family,**  
**the dinners to which i am invited**

**and the ones (at my parents') where he is not-  
who is savage?**

**Times have changed**

**(we are free!)**

**but we are still slaves to**

**the oppression of ignorance,**

**the bigotry that claims**

**his filthy darkness taints my**

**innocent clean whiteness**

**where he clasps my hand**

**protectively,**

**with love.**

**(to be silent is to endorse it)**

Tara's poem and those of many of her classmates moved me. Let me see if I can explain why, knowing as I do that a prose analysis does not fully capture a poem's essence. And let me do so in a way that does not critique the poem as a creative writing teacher or literary critic might, because like my colleagues in psychology, biology, and humanities, my purpose for this assignment was to give Tara a writing-to-learn opportunity about the disciplinary content we were studying, not to provide her with direct instruction and feedback on how to write better poetry. Tara uses sophisticated poetic strategies not necessarily available to all of her classmates, for example, a monologue with an internal dialog in parenthesis, and in doing so she displays imagination, personal engagement, and the close attention to language that I want to help develop in all of my students as readers and writers.

Tara's poem describes a contemporary interracial love relationship to which a white woman's parents are opposed, even hostile, while the black man's family is accepting and hospitable. The tale unfolds through the speaker's reflections, memories, feelings, and thoughts about race and interracial relationships. There is a historical emphasis with "Times have changed" —the black man is descended from slaves and apparently conceived in interracial violence "whip," "(beat) (raped)"—the white master raping the black man's ancestor. This historical reference connects the present reality directly to the slave narratives we had been reading. One subtle irony of the poem with its complex thoughts and feelings is that the black man whose ancestor was conceived in hatred and violence represents love.

I like the visual portrayal on the page—the way lines are arranged and the movement back and forth in time and then a movement to the future—where we, ironically, are still slaves (“not free at all”) to that bigotry “that claims his filthy darkness”—a reference to her father’s voice or that of the dominant white southern society. The last line “(to be silent is to endorse it)” is richer in ambiguity because of the textual representation. The speaker of the poem, in one sense, is speaking out against racism. Yet, why the parenthesis that implies this sentiment is an aside or a kind of silent dialog?

The poem draws me further into interracial experience through color imagery (black, white, green, pale) and “hand” imagery. Strangers stare and “good ole boys snicker” because “(colors don’t mix),” and that’s what her parents’ apparently say with their “silence.” But the truth is that colors do mix—his sable hands and white smile and their hands together “with love” at the end demonstrate that. His clasping of her hand “protectively” is ironic and profound within the context of this poem, for elsewhere the hand imagery is associated with white bigotry and violence, the hand that smacks the “whip” during slavery and the “pointing fingers” on the hands of contemporary racists. He protects her with love, but there is no escaping the “ghosts that still dwell” in those green eyes and the racial hatred and history that infuses and complicates their lives. Thus the poem begins with black/white imagery and ends with the irony of her “innocent clean whiteness” and “his filthy darkness,” ironic because at times the white in this poem symbolizes hate, violence, and separation, and the black (he and his mama) enact community, love, and unity.

The overall impact of Tara’s poem on me is compassion for the interracial couple living in a racist society. I have been invited into a world not my own as created by this poet, and I have been asked to consider the legacy of slavery on contemporary race relations from a new, immediate, and intense perspective. My understanding and my empathy are renewed and enlarged by this student’s insight. Within the context of this course on British Romantic writers, the poet William Blake in “The Little Black Boy” provides readers with a similar experience, creating a dramatic situation in which to explore and express the often invisible toll racism takes on human aspirations. Such writing is the work of poets, whether the famous William Blake or the Clemson

student, Tara Hanshaw, and this is a key point I want my students to learn and to experience through their own writing and our collective reading.

Some students in the course responded to the readings by creating poetic monologues set dramatically and historically in the time of slavery. In “Woman of the House,” Kimaris Toogood writes from the point of view of a plantation wife whose husband brings a slave “domestic” into the home to do housework, but then favors her and fathers children by her, as the plantation wife deteriorates into hatred, jealousy, and drunkenness. The poem ends “I have not given my husband an heir, his name will not live on./But his blood will.” Chris Epting writes in “The Song of the Waves” from the perspective of a slave entrapped on a ship during the Middle Passage—dreaming of his wife left behind in Africa: “And when the salt water mingles with the air,/I shall breathe deep of you and hope that somewhere you are breathing me in also.” Janice Holmes in “Tea at Bellamy’s” writes from the point of view of a slave domestic expressing her anger at slave owners who believe they are doing God’s work by bringing Christianity and western values to their slaves. This poem ends, “They say the sun never sets on the British Empire,/I hope that the sun sets it on fire.”

This ensemble of student voices resonates against one another and against the Romantic Period literature we are reading, thus creating for many students a richer personal connection and communal experience with literature, both canonical literature and the insightful, moving literature the students themselves are composing. Tara reinforces this connection when she writes in a reflective essay: “I have truly enjoyed the experience of expressing myself through poetry and in reading the poems of classmates. It gives each of us a voice and a chance to write of our own experiences, opinions, and emotions instead of simply reading and memorizing parts of others’ writing.” On the first day of class, Tara had responded to a prompt asking what contributions she planned to make to the class. She wrote: “I am pretty shy. Even if I don’t speak much, please know that I am paying attention.” And she was true to her prediction, not participating in class discussions, but obviously paying attention, and eventually contributing to our collaborative learning through the poetry she wrote. Her poetic voice is strong and confident, and it surprised me and others accustomed to her silence. Kimaris

also surprised herself as well as the rest of us. On the first day of class, she had written: “I am not a huge fan of poetry: writing or reading.” Two months later, in a reflective essay about her poem “Woman of the House” Kimaris wrote: “I had originally had several drafts of this one poem because I was writing it with divided opinions about the tone of the poem. But once I opened up to the idea that I was to put more of me, unedited, into the poem, it flowed like a river. The result was a piece that I truly admired, even stuck it on the Fridge!” As I reread the poems and the reflective essays my students wrote that semester, and as I glance back at my eight goals for the poetry assignment, I am persuaded that these goals were fulfilled by the poems Tara, Kimaris, Chris, Janice, and their classmates wrote.

### **Finding a Voice in Modern Art: Poetry in a Humanities Class**

*Catherine Paul*

On the first day of my interdisciplinary humanities course “Museums in Twentieth-Century Culture”—a general-education class—I often ask my students to name a museum they have visited and what they found interesting about it. Every time, there are several students who have never visited a museum. As the semester goes on, other students gradually reveal that they hate museums, especially art museums—they find them intimidating and don’t know how to understand art, especially modern art. Readings, writings, and discussions help them determine where that dislike comes from. We use the ideas of Carol Duncan to consider museums as ritualistic spaces, where citizens go to see how their culture understands itself and to participate in highly structured activities that enforce that sense of self (88-103). We use Eilean Hooper-Greenhill’s writing to discuss how museums, like many cultural institutions, present theories as though they are the only way of understanding the world. My students find that her presentation of older paradigms of science demonstrates that our paradigm is but one way of understanding the natural world, and by trying to see through the eyes of older museum designers—those from the seventeenth century for instance—they discover the limitation of their own era’s vision. Through these discussions, the students start to see how museums’ presentation of art, science, culture, and nature is constructed to create certain experiences and preclude others,

and that often the intimidation that they thought was their experience alone was deliberately built into traditional museums' appearance—high steps, large columns, and artworks on pedestals.

My students' reactions to poetry often involve some of the same intimidation. Many have learned that reading poetry means searching for "hidden meanings," and when they cannot find meanings as insightful as those other students or their teachers discover, they conclude that they are "not very good at poetry." Or alternately, they have come to believe that a poem can mean whatever you want, and so conclude that the activity of reading poetry is a frustrating free-for-all, where they make up something the teacher likes, and so get an A.

In teaching poetry about museums in the context of a museums class, I want my students to see the connections between these two cultural institutions. William Carlos Williams's poem "History" (1917)—which describes a visit to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in which the speaker imaginatively conjures the spirit of an ancient Egyptian priest buried in the sarcophagus at which the speaker is looking—is useful here. "The steps of the museum are high," Williams writes, continuing, "Worshippers pass in and out," thereby emphasizing how museums and temples both assume cultural ascent as part of their purpose (81). We can talk about the plot of the poem—what happens to the speaker inside the museum, why the setting of the museum is important, and how the structure of the poem makes the reading experience something like visiting a real museum. This activity, however, usually starts with a high level of intimidation: many of the students don't get Williams's poem right off the bat. That feeling of *not* understanding means that some students stop at the intimidation and don't ever get into the poem far enough to question why they feel intimidated. While some followed me to my making of this parallel between museums and poetry, many lost interest far sooner.

By writing their own creative assignments, however, students have come to these new understandings themselves, in part because the act of writing poems demystifies poetry. Before returning their poems to them, I read a few aloud, and we talk about what is interesting in them. Even those poems identified as fine fulfillments of the assignment are not as intimidating as professional poetry is. For instance, I read

“Viewing Modern Art” by Talgin Cannon. The class had been studying the works of Marcel Duchamp, including his *Fountain* (1917), which he made by tilting a urinal on its side, and signing it on the bottom right with the pseudonymous “R. MUTT.” He had entered the piece in an exhibition that claimed to be “independent” in order to show that even exhibitions such as this were deeply invested in the established notions of taste of the artistic mainstream. The assignment had been to write a poem responding to Duchamp. Talgin wrote:

**Wow, look at that  
It appears to be a hat**

**Oh no no no no  
It appears to be quite flat**

**Is it an animal or a person  
Is it square, triangle or circle**

**I think it looks good  
Oh you would  
But you can tell it's not good.**

**What?! What do you mean?  
Oh man, can't you see  
That's a piece of toilet bowl  
And it doesn't even gleam.**

**There is one thing thou shalt not fear  
That modern art is quite weird—  
Also you can be exact  
When people question, What the hell is that?**

By focusing on the experience of viewing modern art rather than an interpretation of that art, Talgin can step back from Duchamp's piece to contemplate his own irritation at the work's impenetrability. Talgin's playful tone and use of rhyme correspond to Duchamp's own play, and they lighten the expression of his lingering confusion about what makes *Fountain* “art” instead of a urinal. He uses the “thou shalt” of commandments to amplify the consolation he gives himself and others. The poem seems really liberating, because it vents his frustration with people who claim to like this art.

It would not be possible to move on to more complicated questions without first venting that frustration. He has come away from his new encounter with modern art with a clearer sense of how his world has shifted than if he had not written the poem.

When I read this poem aloud in class, students laughed, identifying with the frustration. One student said she had thought poetry was supposed to be serious and about feelings, but Talgin's poem, while neither of those things, captured her own troubles with modern art; it made her rethink how poetry could work. Another student commented that "Hearing work done by other students opened up some other approaches." Seeing and hearing the teacher take student poetry seriously creates a more comfortable environment in which students can *believe* a teacher's invitation to safely take risks in their writing. Another student, who did not turn in a poem for the first assignment but did for the second, wrote in response "This time writing the poem was a different experience because I actually did the assignment. After hearing some of the other poems I didn't feel as ridiculous. I guess I thought since I really don't write poetry all that well I didn't want to write something that would make me look ridiculous." Hearing the poems of other students, and hearing students say they enjoyed the humor, the irreverence, and the expression of shared emotions, gave hesitant students a way to voice their concerns. While the poetry assignment in itself is a useful creative exercise, repeating it, and thereby allowing students to gain courage from the discussion of the first poems, draws out far more voices than might otherwise speak. It does not matter whether the poems fit critical definitions of "good poetry": a poem can be a great success for an individual student or for the entire class because it suggests topics for conversation, creates mutual understanding, or stretches beyond previous boundaries.

The in-class exercise springing from the poetry assignment consistently encourages previously silent students to speak. Sometimes, as in Talgin's case, a student whose poem was read aloud feels more comfortable voicing ideas. Other times, a student who saw interesting things in a classmate's poem when it was read quietly in a small group, then finds a voice to express these discoveries to the class. And sometimes a student is emboldened by a combination of the two. For instance, Jenny Jackson wrote in her first reflection,



“Initially I was hesitant about writing the assignment because in the past I have been rather ‘poetically challenged.’” She notes, though, that once she got going with the poem, it built itself—but she closes by saying “I just hope we don’t have to read these out loud!!” I feared her dismay when I read her poem aloud as one that was particularly good, even though the author was not revealed. She had written:

**Looking at a painting;  
What does this mean to me?  
What does this mean to the artist?  
Was he cold like me when he created this marvel?  
Was he hungry?  
Was he alone?  
I am cold.  
I am hungry.  
I am not alone, though, when with his work.  
So whose art is this?**

She moves quickly from imagining the artist to examining her responses to the art, suggesting that the artist and the viewer create the artwork together. For students just learning to talk about what they see in art, finding connections between their own world and the seemingly foreign world of an abstract or ancient artwork can be a challenge. Here she speaks of the humanity she shares with the artist, and that expression lets her take ownership of her observations and of the art. Jenny’s poem concisely expresses how she relates to art—its fifty-three words convey a tactile sense of her connection that would be nearly impossible in prose. However, it does so without rhyme or regular meter, and that freedom inspired other students. Her own reflection, quoted above, shows how the process of writing the poem freed up creative parts of her that had felt intimidated by her expectations of what poetry should be. During the discussion of these poems, she commented that poetry and museums are alike in how they ask people to respond, and that both can be intimidating at first, but exciting once you move past that intimidation. *This* was the point I had wanted my students to reach, but we reached it at an unpredictable time and because of a connection a student made on her own and felt newly empowered to express. Jenny, who in her reflection had sought reassurance that she was not “poetically chal-

lenged,” got that reassurance from hearing her poem in discussion. Once students find their voice, and as long as they are encouraged by the teacher, they rarely lose it again.

It is not surprising that these moments of insight and empowerment come from creative writing. “The writing was more like creating artwork myself than writing a paper just talking about something,” wrote Lee McKie, a student who consistently did strong work but rarely talked in class. “Though I’m not a good poet at all, it still felt like the creation of art.” Creation more so than critique allows students to feel that they are working with the artists studied to express ideas. Neither, however, is it surprising that these moments of creative insight came in discussions of early twentieth-century avant-garde art, whose creators themselves challenged museums, which they found oppressive, better for entombing dead things than for artistic creation. Artworks that challenge demonstrate to my students that even such lofty institutions as museums and poetry are not untouchable, and their own attempts at creation bring them into dialogue with these artists and institutions. One student, Jason Snelgrove, a biology major, created for his final project an interactive web museum where his poetry showed visitors how to understand art. For some paintings he included label-copy-like text about the work or artist, but for others he inserted his own poems—some written for the class assignments, and some extras created specially for his museum. For instance, by clicking on an image of Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912), a visitor can access Jason’s poem:

**Watch her rush down the staircase.  
No, she pauses. She stops, she isn’t walking.  
Is she talking?  
No, she can’t—she has no time.  
She must continue her descent.  
So much ado over today!  
Everyone is awaiting her presence.  
The debutante enters her ball.  
Startling, she’s naked.  
Did all the preparation pass in vain?  
No, for I see she is aware of her new state.  
She appears to have recently shaved her legs.**

This poem, like Talgin's, picks up on the playfulness and irreverence in Duchamp's artworks, but it uses them to create a new way of seeing the painting. The nude in the painting becomes more human and more approachable because of the final detail of the leg-shaving. The poetry assignment had opened a way for Jason to respond to art, and his web museum may have grown in part from that creative in-class experience. By placing his poems into the same spaces as the artworks to which they responded, Jason created a context in which writers and artists and visitors could interact, and in which creative responses are as valid and important as factual or historical explanations. Like the other students who made literary artworks, Jason had become an artistic creator, even a writer. Whereas students rarely think of themselves as writers after completing an assigned research paper, making a poem allows that identification, leaving them more empowered to express and take seriously their own ideas.

### **Conclusion: Why Poetry?**

In our analysis, the four of us found that when students write poetry in response to a specific assignment carefully constructed to fulfill a course goal, under the tutelage of an encouraging teacher who makes students feel "safe" as they compose and share, most authors do express fresh perspectives on disciplinary knowledge and develop better understanding of the multiple purposes, connections, and contexts for that knowledge. On many occasions we also found that students discovered alternative language to express their ideas and values, thus broadening their use of language as a communication tool.

But why poetry? We feel confident that other forms of creative writing composed in the "spectator" role, such as short stories and plays, would also provide students with similar opportunities for learning and expression. However, poetry's intensity of language and succinctness allow for pedagogical use in the disciplines in ways that longer and more time-consuming writing tasks do not. The students' poems quoted in this article, with the exception of the two from the biology class, were assigned as brief, daily homework assignments. Students are free to spend as much time writing them as they wish—and undoubtedly some writers spend less than ten minutes and others spend an hour or more—but the choice is theirs. In some cases, teachers set limits for sub-

mitting poems—a minimum of ten lines but not longer than one page. Because the quality of a poem is not commented on critically or graded, teachers can set parameters on their own reading time as well. As previously mentioned, the purpose of these assignments is not to teach the students to be better poets but to provide opportunities for them to engage the content in meaningful ways. And short poems, like the ones presented here, can easily be read aloud to the class to enhance perspectives and collaborative participation on the content being studied.

For many students, creating a poem provides a way into disciplinary discussions in which the writers' own poetic language engages, recasts, and critiques disciplinary knowledge without having to conform to the conventions of what to them is an alien discourse. Instead of relying on discipline-specific diction, students construct metaphors—making cornbread, a batter striking out—that use common experience to understand complex phenomena. And instead of adopting a reverent attitude toward academic subject matter, students use poems to employ a more casual or “lowbrow” response. For other students, who “know” the formula when they are required to write a lab report or book review, composing a poem occasions disequilibrium because they have learned to mimic the prose of familiar “school” discourse, and now to write poetry they must rethink both form and content. As one colleague told us recently in describing the usual academic writing of such students, “they just go on automatic pilot.” Yet many of these students, both the novices and the automatic pilots, respond enthusiastically to writing a poem on an academic topic. As teachers, we seek to provide these inexperienced poets with writing tasks that are unpredictable—tasks that keep writers off balance and tend to shut down the automatic pilot.

For example, when people write poetically and express their ideas and values about science in non-scientific language, freedom from scientific discourse creates opportunities for writers to make personal connections to what they are writing about. Putting themselves in another's shoes, they achieve informed empathy, compassion, and a wider sense of science's ethical implications. Writers are free to invent their own poetic language in order to find fresh insights into their learning as well as imaginative and innovative ways to communicate with others. They demonstrate a

less sterile sense of the material addressed, relating their own emotional investment or enjoying a humorous response. Writers take the unfamiliar knowledge they are learning in the class and attempt to integrate it into the familiar—that is, integrate the new knowledge into what they already know—and thereby assimilate, enrich, or critique the new. From this integration they might clarify science’s relationship to daily life, imagine the experience of mental illness or slavery, or identify the strangeness of modern art. Some students tell us they think of themselves as “artists” and “writers” after they have written poems in the disciplines. They do the work of poets and thinkers—not just study how others do such work. They develop a voice that emerges from their “spectator” role writing—a voice distinct and often more fully engaged than the one they typically employ in biology, psychology, and other classes. This voice speaks with authority about new understanding and invites its listener to partake of its discovery.

As teachers, we see these poets creating knowledge using course content and context, sometimes with startling originality. In writing poetry, they usually do not simply reproduce what they have heard in lectures and read in texts. This quest for originality is why when we read a student’s poem that we believe to be insightful in its perspective and use of language, we find ways to share it with the rest of the class. Such sharing is why we ask students to write at least two poems during a semester, since students perceive many new and creative ways to express themselves after they have seen and heard a myriad of possibilities from their classmates’ first poems.

Poetry assignments strengthen the teaching-learning environment of our classrooms. As we or the authors themselves read their poetry to the class, listeners respond with laughter, awe, thoughtfulness, empathy, questions, and applause. Poems are sent to parents, posted on refrigerators, entered in contests, published on the web and in literary magazines. Students converse with other writers and artists, thereby becoming creators and not just consumers—and, after initial hesitation, they enjoy it. Writers surprise us, themselves, and each other. In some cases, as with shy students, we view them differently after reading their poem, and in doing so our expectations change. Most of us, teachers and students alike, feel that we have a more complete picture of

the human beings who are our classmates, and this understanding enhances our other academic work in the class.

All of these aspects of students' experiences with writing poetry in the disciplines speak to the successes of poetry writing as a pedagogical tool. The consistency of our findings—despite disparate disciplines and learning environments—has allowed us to generalize about how poetry writing enhances learning across the curriculum. And our findings have become the basis of our work to provide other faculty with models and approaches to using poetry in their own classroom. We will continue to make poetry assignments that provide opportunities for creative thinking as well as critical thinking. We are considering broadening PAC to include performance, visual arts, and new media. We are even imagining ways to broaden the project beyond the current twenty-four participants to include many more faculty, thus making PAC an integral component of our university-wide, communication-across-the-curriculum program. Ideally, writing poems in courses across the curriculum will no longer be an esoteric activity but an important influence on student learning and campus culture.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at "WAC 2002: The Sixth National Conference on Writing Across the Curriculum," Houston, Texas.
- <sup>2</sup> We would like to thank our students for permission to quote them: Jack Berno, Talgin Cannon, Chris Epting, Laurie Gambrell, Tara M. Hanshaw, Emily Hertzog, Janice Holmes, Jenny Jackson, Jennie Kill, Maureen McHugh, Jason Snelgrove, and Kimaris Toogood.