The Long and Winding Road: Supporting Student Creativity in Poetry Writing

Maggie Guttormson and Ann Ellsworth

Teaching middle school presents particular celebrations and challenges. Seeing tentative students grow in confidence, discover new interests, and accomplish targeted goals makes for highly satisfying moments. On the other hand, witnessing their struggles, fragility, and tendency to rush to judgment is heart-wrenching. Over the past few years I have found middle school students to be incredibly critical of themselves and hyper-sensitive to feedback. While this may be due to transitioning into adolescence, it is my job to ensure that their academic and emotional needs are being met, so they grow as effective communicators. Because of their heightened sensitivity toward feedback, my approach to instruction and assessment, by necessity, has been altered.

Putting one's thoughts on paper for all to read and for the teacher to judge is very public. As a result, I have had to step back and scrutinize my grading practices. Now I grade only one or two standards for each writing piece. With this approach, I can nudge students to take chances in their written expression. In a recent writing assignment, for example, students were graded only on their thesis statement and organizational topic sentences. Additionally, I assessed their ability to write in a formal style, rather than use informal language. My students learned to eliminate casual expressions, such as *Like I said earlier* or *it is awesome because…* While other aspects of clear communication still mattered, my focus was on developing strongly worded thesis and topic sentences. To my delight, students generated higher caliber statements because they didn't have to worry about the

perfect hook or conclusion. Focusing on limited elements seemed to improve their skills and attitudes.

However, when I enthusiastically introduce the end-of-the-year poetry project, I encountered resistance. Some expressed concern at "not knowing how to write poetry" while others felt limited in their creative expression. In reflecting on their reactions, I supposed it was because they believe poetry has one correct interpretation. It does not. Then, too, perhaps their experiences with poetry were limited and or even negative. I believe "poetry opens a window that lets in the voice of the writer" (Harrison, 2006, p. 43) and so pondered my options.

My Writing Voice

I never considered myself a writer until I was in my mid-twenties and taking coursework as part of teacher preparation. In one required upper-division English Language Arts class, the support of a caring instructor catapulted my writing career in a forward direction. Her manifest belief in my abilities impacted me; I found my writing identity. I realized I had something to say and for the first time, had the courage to express it on paper. A year later when I applied to positions in the local school district, I was delighted to be offered a contract teaching math, my long-time passion, and communication arts, my new-found love. I relished my professional niche in working with numeracy, literacy, and middle schoolers. Even after five years of classroom experience, I remain humbled by the profound responsibility I have for teaching developing writers. That the profession entrusts me to teach this core subject motivates me to make each lesson student-centered, relevant, and inspiring.

Daily, students witness my enthusiasm for writing, my curiosity about words, and my explorations with various writing styles. I am that teacher-coach who believes every class session is a teaching-learning opportunity because language is all around us. Knowing how anxious thirteen-year-olds are to receive a paper marked in red, I fully appreciate why they might be reluctant to have their teacher, peers, or parents proofread their work. I am deeply sensitive to the plight of students who regularly struggle with writing something new, fun, and innovative because I was *that kid* in school. Too well I know the anxious feeling that strangles creativity and limits greatness. These feelings and experiences from my own past were the impetus for developing a poetry unit. Short assignments and small successes can pave the way for taking risks with longer pieces. I learned about the benefits of poetry's inclusion in my language arts class. Smith (1985) explained that with poetry teachers have a smorgasbord of options to help students learn how their language works and how to work their language. I was convinced, and thus was my poetry project took life.

As a novice teacher, I exhorted students to take risks and ask questions; unfortunately, my mode of teaching ran counter to supporting the very behaviors I was endorsing. I put students on the spot without providing them think time. I asked students to come to the board without prior preparation. Truthfully, my method of grading didn't support taking risks. In fact, I realized quickly that my actions belied my words; I was encouraging students to hide, not participate.

Teacher reflection changed everything. Grappling with how to introduce poetry as a genre study within an emotionally "safe" learning environment, I promised myself that this unit cycle would be different. My priority was teaching in such a way to ensure that learners would feel confident sharing their creations. I did this through a number of

conversations and trust building exercises. I adopted a performance-based grading system that encouraged mastery of a skill and procedures over correct answers. Since encouraging risk taking through anonymity in assignments worked in my math classes, I decided to try it in writing workshop. Instead of names, I assigned students codes. Together we developed rubrics so everyone had buy-in, and we established trust by brainstorming and thinking "out of the box."

Supporting students in the initial process stages by defining clear parameters for assignments and providing detailed rubrics for grading would result in a rich harvest, or so I thought. With this framework, surely students, aware of how they would be assessed on tasks, would go beyond stilted, safe responses. But I found only my strongest writers taking risks. With this new reality, I became more circumspect during the grading process; I curbed my tendency to offer abundant (read: too much) feedback. The fact remained. Regardless of how constructive and carefully worded my well-intentioned comments were, students would shut down and cease being creative. I needed to address their vulnerabilities as fledging poets.

The Poetry Project

This unit introduced students to a variety of poetry formats, both traditional and newly invented, with a series of assignments (See Appendix A.) Through eight mini-lessons, students learned to write in various formats. The overarching learning target was two-fold: for students to take ownership of their creativity and to meet the Common Core Standards for Language.

Since the unit was heavily based on creativity, I designed a gallery walk-peer assessment, for I believed traditional or standards-based grading would stifle imagination.

Students presented their projects for class members to silently read and reflect on; then peers were to provide positive and constructive feedback on any three. I modified my grading of poetry projects as pass/fail. Either students turned in ten submissions that matched various poetry forms, or they didn't.

Standards

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.8.5
  Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.8.5.A
  Interpret figures of speech (e.g. verbal irony, puns) in context.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.8.5.B
  Use the relationship between particular words to better understand each of the words.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.8.5.C
  Distinguish among the connotations (associations) of words with similar denotations (definitions) (e.g., *bullheaded, willful, firm, persistent, resolute*).

Diving into Limerick Poetry

Limerick poetry quickly proved to be a student favorite. Eighth graders enjoyed the silly nonsensical form, but were also challenged by syllable and rhyming requirements (See Appendix B.) Early in the lesson sequence, I provided students with a chance to explore and develop an understanding of the syllable rules, the rhyming structure, and the typical "story lines" associated with limerick poetry by looking at exemplars. Edward Lear's limericks were particularly helpful in developing students' growing understanding of the form.

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to…
- Identify syllable and rhyming structures of limerick poetry through example poems created by master poets.
- Distinguish typical story lines used in limericks.

- Implement the syllable and rhyming structures of limerick poetry in their own limericks.
- Author a limerick using knowledge gained and practice from the lesson.

Materials
- Poetry packet (limerick pages)
- Videos:
    - Kid's Limericks - https://youtu.be/5DBbINl36b4
    - The Limerick Song - https://youtu.be/k-rN3DGMCsE
    - How to Write a Limerick - https://youtu.be/t3OeU8GGusM

Pre-teaching:

At the beginning of the unit, students learned about figurative language vocabulary

(metaphors, similes, onomatopoeia, allegory, etc.). Through a jigsaw activity, students

delved into different types of figurative language and created a short 2-minute

presentation with examples of a particular vocabulary term to the class.

Lesson Sequence:

1. First, students read the limericks provided in their packets with their elbow partner

   while thinking with the prompts written to on the board:

   a. They postulated answers for the following prompts:

      i. Do you notice any commonalities in how limericks begin and end?

      ii. Identify if there are any syllable patterns in limericks.

      iii. What rhyming scheme do you notice is common in limericks?

2. After students answered these questions, I played the "Kid's Limericks" video and

   students continued to refine their ideas for the structure of limericks for story line,

   syllables, and rhyming scheme.

3. After 10 minutes, students shared observations that a limerick tends to be a

   rhythmic joke. While the beginning line seems to have a fairly normal start "There

once was a …" etc. the ending of the poems usually take a joking or sarcastic turn. Students noticed that limericks tend to be funny and tend to make fun of an event or social behaviors through allegory or play-on-words. As well, they began to define ideas about syllable rules and rhyming schemes seeing that there are three longer lines in lines 1, 2, and 5 and shorter in lines 3 and 4. The rhyming pattern follows the same line length pattern.

4. We then watched the other two videos: The Limerick Song and How to Write a Limerick to finish our notes and understanding of limericks in our structured note taking pages in the poetry packet.

5. We also discussed the concept of creative license to drive home the point that if a student writes a line that has 9 syllables, but the rest of the poem follows the syllable structure they have identified, then it is acceptable. This helped to cement our overall goal of having a safe, judgment-free environment for our final poetry projects. As long as the basic structure and cadence of the poems is upheld, the required syllables usually fall into place or becomes a non-issue.

6. Students drafted a limerick, first with their elbow partner, using a class-created first line and then later writing one independently. To scaffold this task, we brainstormed a beginning two lines for the entire class, "There once was a black and white cat. Who lived in a grungy old hat…."

7. Elbow partners created the two shorter lines and the final longer line with a "-at" ending rhyme making sure the final line concludes the poem with solid punch line. Students were then encouraged to share their limericks with groups around them.

Assessment

The poetry project culminated in a gallery walk. Students brought snacks to share and were to provide feedback to three randomly-assigned individuals. To keep the assessment process as stress-free as possible, students' identities were masked, and no names appeared on the critique/feedback forms. Students were assigned a code word or phrase – their poetry alias – to ensure confidentiality. Knowing who belonged to which code name, however, I could effectively monitor the process. For example, if by chance, someone has been bullied through the feedback loop, I was able to speak with the offending student about his or her inappropriate comment. Many saw the anonymity as a chance to take risks. No one knew "Laughing Unicorn," who provided critique on "Dancing Dragon's" project. And "Leaping Leprechaun" did not feel judged for not understanding the poetry of "Smiling Salamander".

Conclusion

Words and language are the infrastructure of English. There is no better choice than poetry to experience its beauty. Able to evoke an emotional response from a reader, poetry has staying power. Its inclusion in a literacy curriculum is most certainly a necessity, not optional. Limericks offer particular appeal. Tomkins (2000) observes that they can encourage students to laugh at language, helping them to appreciate those verses that amuse and delight. Poetry explorations, such as those described in this article, can transform apathetic students into poetry enthusiasts, like those in Mrs. Guttormson's class.

Appendix A

8th Grade Poetry Unit

Type of Poem:	Description:	Length:

Ode	A poem celebrating an idea, object, or person	10 – 2 line stanzas
Haiku	3 line poems that explore an idea	3-5 Haikus on one topic
Limerick	Irish Rhyming Poem	5 lines
Ballad	Narrative poem containing a refrain	Minimum 4 stanzas without refrain. Refrain must be used at least twice for a total of 6 stanzas
Pantoum	A poem with repeating lines according to a pattern	4 stanzas
Line Messaging	A poem in which a message can be read from the last line of each stanza	Minimum 3 stanzas
Four poems of YOUR choice!	Free verse, sonnet, acrostic, tongue twister, diamante, etc.	Must be at least 8 lines, or the minimum for the form chosen.

Appendix B
Limericks

Syllables:
Line #1: _____
Line #2: _____
Line #3: _____
Line #4: _____
Line #5: _____

Ending Rhyme:
Line #1: _____
Line #2: _____
Line #3: _____
Line #4: _____
Line #5: _____

<u>Example Limericks</u>

There was a Young Lady whose eyes,
Were unique as to color and size;

When she opened them wide,
People all turned aside,
And started away in surprise.

There was an Old Person of Dover,
Who rushed through a field of blue Clover
But some very large bees,
Stung his nose and his knees,
So he very soon went back to Dover.

References

Harrison, D. (2006). The Letterman factor—A matter of meter. *The Montana State Reading Journal, (42)*2, 43-45.

Smith, R.J. (1985). *Using poetry to teach reading and language arts.* New York: Teachers College.

Tompkins, G. (2000). *Teaching writing balancing process and product.* Upper Saddle River: NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

About the Authors

Maggie Guttormson teaches eighth grade Communication Arts at Sacajawea Middle School in Bozeman, Montana. She shares a passion for poetry as does her former Montana State University professor, **Ann Ellsworth.**