

James Brewbaker

Fifty-Five Teachers, Poems in Hand, Approach the Cruellest Month

In anticipation of National Poetry Month, James Brewbaker presents a collection of lessons for teaching poetry, all utilizing the same group of five poems. Various educators provide the lessons, demonstrating the value of diverse approaches to the same material.

A dream scenario: You agree to substitute tomorrow morning in an English teacher friend's third-period sophomore class. She gives you a copy of *Mindscaapes*, a small, well-worn volume of poems. She has marked five short, contemporary poems in the table of contents.

"Use these, please," she says. "The kids should like them."

Two of the poets, Donald Hall and John Ciardi, are familiar though not their poems, "The Stump" and "The Shark." You don't recognize the other three poets or their works—Marcie Hans's "Fueled," Phyllis Gotlieb's "First Person Demonstrative," or Dick Higgins's "teechur" (see fig. 1). There is no comfort in the familiar here—no Dickinson, Keats, Hughes, or Frost, nor any other poets you studied in college.

"My class—well, they're a mixed group of good kids, most of the time," she tells you. "They should have these read before class. Have fun!"

Now what? you think to yourself. *What matters in a fifty-three-minute poetry lesson? Similes and metaphors? Irony? Tidbits of biography? Personal engagement? Fun?*

What Does It Mean to Teach Poetry?

April—T. S. Eliot's proverbial cruelest month and National Poetry Month—fast approaches. Many of us will teach poetry in April, but I am never quite sure what *teaching poetry* means. Over three decades, I have observed poetry lessons that touched me in

powerful ways, and I have observed poetry lessons that made me cringe. I have taught both myself—lessons that soared, lessons that flopped.

So the topic intrigues me. I wonder what teachers want students to learn when they *teach poetry*. I wonder how a poetry lesson resembles (or doesn't) other lessons. I wonder about how teachers begin and end poetry lessons, and I wonder what leads a teacher to tell himself or herself, when the fifty-three minutes are history, "That worked. That was good, worth doing again."

Several years ago, Hal Foster, Dawnelle Hyland, and I decided to explore what teachers meant by *teaching poetry* by asking them, in effect, to place themselves in the dream scenario I describe above—five short poems, a class of tenth graders, a class period. We asked participants—novice and veteran teachers, teacher educators, and NCTE leaders—to plan and then describe on paper what they would do during that hypothetical lesson.

For four months we gathered lessons via email and the NCTE-Talk listserv, through personal contacts, and from captive audiences like Hal's and my English methods classes. Eventually, we gathered fifty-five responses, a not-so-random sample of lessons from English teachers in Kentucky, California, Virginia, Michigan, and Florida as well as from our own states—Ohio, North Carolina, and Georgia. To be sure, we recognized that our data would provide no Rorschach test revealing the state of poetry teaching on the cusp of a new millennium, but we also knew that these fifty-five lessons might at least reveal some interesting tendencies or trends.

FIGURE 1. The Five Poems

The Shark
John Ciardi

My sweet, let me tell you about the Shark.
Though his eyes are bright, his thought is dark.
He's quiet—that speaks well of him.
So does the fact that he can swim.
But though he swims without a sound,
Wherever he swims he looks around
With those two bright eyes and that one dark thought.
He has only one but he thinks it a lot.
And the thought he thinks but can never complete
Is his long dark thought of something to eat.
Most anything does. And I have to add
That when he eats, his manners are bad.
He's a gulper, a ripper, a snatcher, a grabber.
Yes, his manners are drab. But his thought is drabber.
That one dark thought he can never complete
of something—anything—somehow to eat.
Be careful where you swim, my sweet.

"The Shark" reprinted by permission of the Ciardi Family Publishing Trust.

The Stump
Donald Hall

Today they cut down the oak.
Strong men climbed with ropes
in the brittle tree.
The exhaust of a gasoline saw
was blue in the branches.
It is February. The oak has been dead a year.
I remember the great sails of its branches
rolling out greenly, a hundred and twenty feet up,
and acorns thick on the lawn.
Nine cities of squirrels lived in that tree.
Today they run over the snow
squeaking their lamentation.
Yet I was happy that it was coming down.
"Let it come down!" I kept saying to myself
with a joy that was strange to me.
Though the oak was the shade of old summers,
I loved the guttural saw.

"The Stump" reprinted by permission of Donald Hall.

First Person Demonstrative
Phyllis Gotlieb

I'd rather
heave half a brick than say
I love you, though I do
I'd rather
crawl in a hole than call you
darling, though you are
I'd rather
wrench off an arm than hug you
 though
it's what I long to do
I'd rather
gather a posy of poison ivy than
ask if you love me
so if my
hair doesn't stand on end it's
 because
it knows its place
and if I
don't take a bite of your ear
 it's because
I never tease it
and if my
heart isn't in my mouth it's
 because
gristle gripes my guts
and if you
miss the message better get new
glasses and read it twice.

"First Person Demonstrative" reprinted by permission of Phyllis Gotlieb.

Fueled
Marcie Hans

Fueled
by a million
man-made
wings of fire—
the rocket tore a tunnel
through the sky—
and everybody cheered.
Fueled
only by a thought from God—
the seedling
urged its way
through thicknesses of black—
and as it pierced
the heavy ceiling of the soil—
and launched itself
up into outer space—
no
one
even
clapped.

"Fueled" from SERVE ME A SLICE OF MOON, copyright © 1965 by Marcie Hans and renewed 1993 by Ernestine Hans, reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Inc.

teechur
Dick Higgins

he is trying to think
 to teach them to think
he tries it by a pond
to tell them why he likes it
to help them like it
he teaches them
he makes love to them
he dies with them a little
they ask no questions
after a while they all go away

"teechur" reprinted by permission of the Estate of Dick Higgins.

To ferret out these tendencies or trends, Hal, Dawnelle, and I began sorting and counting. We wanted to answer several questions: What sort of knowledge about poetry do teachers in our sample value? Was there evidence that their teaching practices were informed by reader-response theory—that is, were teachers setting the stage for students to discover personal meaning in poetry, or were they more inclined to pass along predetermined interpretations? To what extent would their lessons be about poetry and poems per se, focus on meaning or theme, or stress something else entirely?

What Is Important to Teach and How to Do It

Space does not permit a detailed review of our findings here. Rather, there follow a few of the highlights of our analysis as well as a snapshot of several representative lessons. I hope that you will take ideas and strategies from this article that will prepare you for National Poetry Month, that will help you think about and rethink what to do with an occasional poetry lesson, a three-day sequence of lessons, or even a flashy end-of-year poetry unit complete with a coffeehouse poetry reading or slam competition.

First, we took a close look at instructional intent, either stated or implied instructional outcomes (see fig. 2). Among our fifty-five teachers, twenty-one devised lessons that centered on interpreting meaning or theme; eighteen planned lessons that dealt with poetry as poetry—its conventions and language; and eleven developed lessons designed to arouse students' interest or, in a distinctly open-ended manner, elicit their responses. (Five responses were too sketchy to categorize.)

Theme

Twenty-one teachers planned lessons that centered more on theme or meaning than on other matters. Of these lessons, seventeen were what we call *theme convergent*. In these lessons, teachers decided what their thematic emphasis would be. If, for example, they used Marcie Hans's "Fueled" in their lesson, they guided students, gently but relentlessly, to their teacherly interpretation that the poem is about how human beings are frequently more dazzled by powerful technology (the rocket) than they are by the

FIGURE 2. Instructional Intent of Poetry Lessons

Meaning or theme	21
Poetic conventions or language	18
Student interest or response	11
Uncategorized	5
Total number of responses	55

commonplace yet miraculous power of nature (the seedling).

Former *EJ* editor and NCTE president Leila Christenbury narrowed the thrust of the lesson when she chose "Fueled," "The Stump," and "The Shark" through the unifying theme of nature—"what we think it is and how we react to it and project our feelings onto it." To make the lesson work, Leila found the thematic connection herself and decided to use three poems rather than all five. Then she formed groups of three or four students to explore pairs of poems—"Fueled" and "The Stump," "The Stump" and "The Shark," and "The Shark" and "Fueled." Afterwards, groups would report, and a full-class discussion would ensue. Leila noted that the activities would probably take more than one class period.

In her written comments, Leila bristled a bit at a teacher's asking teens to read five poems overnight—"That kind of quantity just begs for superficiality." This may be why she had her students work with three "nature poems."

Leila's lesson, as noted, is *theme convergent*. She puts nature on the table, but she arranges the activity in such a manner that her students may discover for themselves the contradictions, the insights, and the ironies that Leila found in—and, from her experiences, brought to—the poems.

Only four lessons in our sample were *theme divergent*. Teachers designed these lessons to deal primarily with interpretation but cast themselves in the role of drawing out students' interpretations rather than sharing their own insights. David Lenoir's lesson exemplified this characteristic. It opened with a poll of students as to which poems they liked, didn't like, or were confused by. As teacher, David wrote that he would pick a poem for discussion based on the volume and intensity of student response as a starting point. Students would brainstorm questions they have about the text—clarifications, allusions, whatever

they would like to discuss or know more about. “Then we’d set out as a class to try to supply answers—or our best guesses—to the questions,” David notes. “The object is not to get through all the questions—it’s to talk about the responses.”

There is a certain formlessness to David’s lesson that I like but that some would find off-putting. That said, his approach comes close to the response-centered strategies Alan Purves and others describe so well in *How Porcupines Make Love: Notes on a Response-Centered Curriculum*. A teacher introduces a poem—and waits. Young people talk—or not. No one fears or needs to fill silence. The teacher poses an occasional open-ended question and helps students see where their responses come from and how they are like and unlike the responses of others in the class. There is much confidence implicit in such lessons, confidence in readers, confidence in one’s role as teacher.

Conventions and Language

A sizable number of teachers, eighteen, decided to teach “poetry as poetry” in some fashion—to engage students in an exploration of the characteristics of poetry or poetic language. Julia Shields’s inventive lesson is a good example. Julia used small, independent groups. One group would receive copies of “The Stump” with several key words omitted (*brittle, blue, sails, lamentation, and guttural*); the group’s task would be to find good words to put in the blanks. A second group would be charged with adding three lines to “First Person Demonstrative” in such a way that other class members would not know which lines were new. A third group would receive “Fueled” with its lines cut into strips and out of order. The group’s task: to see if the lines could be put in the correct sequence. Julia observes: “Have each group share its accomplishment—what they considered as they made their decisions. Never mind whether they made ‘right’ decisions; what we want to hear is what they thought about. They are likely to have considered various elements of poetry.” Julia’s lesson, like Leila’s, dealt with three of the five poems.

A strength of Julia’s lesson is subtlety. Her engaging activities lead students to weigh and perhaps discover specific qualities of poetry—to develop insights about diction, tone, and voice—but they avoid terminology until and unless it is needed.

Interest and Response

A sizable though smaller number of teachers, eleven of them, decided to either *stimulate student interest in* (six) or *elicit student response to* (five) the poems. Diana Mitchell wrote that she would “whet student appetites so they really want to dig into the poems.” How? She first would invite students to rank the five poems (1–5) with a “1” ranking going to the poem they understood best. Once rankings were in place, groups of three or four students would share their rankings and explain their reasons. After the small-group activity, students might change their rankings. Then the teacher would record rankings—perhaps before-and-after rankings—for each poem.

Diana noted that her purpose was “to start out explorations of the poems by looking at what students were responding to or not. Students will usually begin to dig into structure [and] word choice . . . at this point.” She suggested that, on the following day, they would be ready to grapple with the poems in substantive ways.

Though somewhat similar, Gloria Pipkin’s lesson focused less on appetite-whetting and more on drawing out students’ responses. Gloria would begin by asking students to write freely for several minutes about the two poems from the five that, in her words, “exercised the strongest pull.” Then students would sign up on lists posted around the classroom to select “one poem with more appeal/challenges/pleasures/problems” to discuss in a small group. Once in groups, two student volunteers would read the group’s poem aloud; these two would say whatever they wished about the poem, without comment from other students. Afterwards, other group members would respond.

The open-endedness of Gloria’s lesson is appealing. She enhances it by allowing students to choose the poem they most want to examine more closely in small groups.

As is always the case with small-group teaching, she relinquishes to a great extent her power to guide what happens in those groups, thereby revealing her implicit confidence that students can and will be engaged by activities they help shape.

Her engaging activities lead students to weigh and perhaps discover specific qualities of poetry—to develop insights about diction, tone, and voice—but they avoid terminology until and unless it is needed.

Bringing Together Adolescents and Poetry

When Hal, Dawnelle, and I met to fine-tune “Five Poems, Fifty-Five Teachers,” our presentation to NCTE members at the Spring Conference in Charlotte, North Carolina, we discussed the fact that there is no such thing as a *perfect* or even *good* poetry lesson on paper. No, we knew that good poetry lessons occur in classrooms where young people are guided by responsive teachers who implement as well as they plan. This is true, of course, whether teachers are working with contemporary poems, with traditional poems, or with Shakespearean sonnets. ’Twas ever thus.

Even so, we admired the imagination, the aptness, and the professionalism of the teachers who responded positively to our invitation, who put themselves into our dream scenario, who closed their

eyes and prepared to teach a class of hypothetical sophomores (“good kids, most of the time”) and created, on paper at least, lessons that engage students while respecting both poet and reader. I applaud Leila, David, Julia, Diana, and Gloria for that. I want to be fifteen again and a sophomore in one of their classes.

This, then, is my hope for National Poetry Month 2005—that, when we put aside novels and informative essays and high-stakes testing and bring poetry and adolescents together, we honor both.

Works Cited

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In addition to his role as poetry editor of *English Journal*, **James Brewbaker** has edited, with Dawnelle J. Hyland, *Poems by Adolescents and Adults—A Thematic Collection for Middle School and High School* (Urbana: NCTE, 2002). A veteran teacher educator, he enjoys landscape gardening and Indian cooking. *email*: brewpoem@hotmail.com. **Leila Christenbury** teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University and is author of *Making the Journey: Being and Becoming a Teacher of English Language Arts* (2nd ed.; Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2000). **Hal Foster** teaches at Youngstown State University and is author of *Crossing Over: Teaching Meaning-Centered Secondary English Language Arts* (2nd ed.; Mahwah: Erlbaum, 2002). **Dawnelle Hyland**, an NBPTS-certified teacher, teaches middle school English language arts in Durham, North Carolina. She received the prestigious Terry Sanford Award for Creative Teaching in 2003. **David Lenoir** teaches English and English education at Western Kentucky University. **Diana Mitchell** teaches at Michigan State University and is author of *Children’s Literature: An Invitation to the World* (Boston: Allyn, 2002). **Gloria Pipkin**, who taught in Florida schools for twenty years, is coauthor (with Releah Cossett Lent) of *At the Schoolhouse Gate: Lessons in Intellectual Freedom* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002). **Julia Shields** is retired English department chair of Charlottesville High School in Virginia.

EJ 90 Years Ago

Knowledge of Punctuation

In the first place, where do we get our knowledge of punctuation? From school textbooks. Where did the writers get their knowledge? From earlier textbooks. If we follow up this cascade, what source do we reach? John Wilson’s *Treatise* of 1871. Authors have never made the least contribution to the art. (Don’t be offended by the rashness of such a sweeping negative. Ponder the statement calmly for several months before denying it.)

C. H. Ward. “‘Punctator Gingriens’: A Call to Arms.” *EJ* 4.7 (1915): 451–57.