Making Connections through Poetry: Writers-Readers-Teachers

#AWP2020

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EVENT OUTLINE
Key questions to consider:
1. Why is collaboration better than working alone?
2. How do poets find partners?
3. What are the steps in writing “on topic?”
4. What are possible connections between science and poetry?
5. What are some steps in curating poetry anthologies?
6. What are publishers looking for in poetry?
7. What do educators want from poetry?

Select Bibliography
A thesaurus is part of any poet’s toolbox, but its use and usefulness can be applied to any kind of writing. What I call “word digging”—exploring layers of meaning—provides a context for building vocabulary and helps writers find precise language to describe observations, state ideas, and convey information that accurately reflects intention.

To get started, you may assign students a keyword that is related to a particular subject, part of a vocabulary list, or simply a random doozy. Explain that this keyword is to be used as a springboard, and have them use a thesaurus to dig down at least three levels.

*Note: I prefer using an actual thesaurus rather than an online version, but either will do.*

- Students look up the keyword to get the initial list of synonyms; using precision of language as a criterion, choose one of the synonyms and look it up to get another set; repeat the exercise to get third set of synonyms or even a fourth.

- Along the way, each student builds a lexicon that can be used to forge connections, spark ideas, suggest images. In the workshop example, I started with *dilapidated* and went to *fragile* by way of *decrepit* and *frail*. Another word digger might reach a different conclusion, and students can compare their excavations to enhance the exercise.

- The word list, including the initial keyword, can then be used to create a poem, write up a lab experiment, summarize a current event, craft an essay, or begin a short story.

Two more tips:

**Word Tickets.** You may want to have students figure out a way to keep track of the words they discover. I use blank raffle tickets and write one word on each one to create a set of “word tickets,” which can then be chosen at random and mixed and matched to suggest images and spark ideas. Have each student make an individual set of word tickets or have the students work together to create a classroom set of gems from the words they have excavated. Have each student choose five tickets or choose five tickets for the class to use. Challenge students to use all five words in a quick write or incorporate them into a poem, paragraph, character sketch, flash fiction piece, and so on.

**Daily Quick Write.** My tenth-grade English teacher had the class do a five-minute quick write at the beginning of every period in response to our assigned reading—one paragraph, which he graded on a 1–5 scale. The takeaways were, for me, invaluable: I learned that I had to keep up with the homework (you were sunk if you didn’t actually read the chapter), I learned to summarize ideas quickly and clearly, and I eventually learned to write a crackerjack paragraph. Word digging could be built into a similar task as part of the classroom routine.
Skinny Poem

By ________________ Topic: ____________________

RECYCLED WORDS

1. ________________________________________________________(repeats on line 11)
2. ______________________________ SAME WORD AS 6 and 10
3. ______________________________
4. ______________________________
5. ______________________________
6. ______________________________ SAME WORD AS 2 and 10
7. ______________________________
8. ______________________________
9. ______________________________
10. ______________________________ SAME WORD AS 2 and 6
11. ________________________________ (repeats line 1)

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How to Recycle a Poem

Gather:
• A copy of “Recycling” by Susan Blackaby
• A copy of the Recycling Chart
• A copy of “Skinny Poem” template

Begin:
• Ask what does it mean to recycle
• Ask why recycling matters
• Record answers on the chart

Show:
• Susan Blackaby’s recitation of “Recycling”
  (https://youtu.be/wLYAtGvEXmk)

Hand out a copy of “Recycling” and have students:
• Circle word that could be recycled from this poem into a new poem

Hand out the “Skinny Poem” template
• Students put the words into the box and follow the skinny poem format to recycle the words into a new poem about recycling.
• When finished put the poems on PADLET to share, have students illustrate them.

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