Exploration and Creation Exercises to Teach Literacy with Poetry

Jarrett Webster

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Abstract

The constant bombardment of technological advancements complicates the educator's role and conflates many rhetorical relationships that students' previously had. Reframing rhetorical ideals in a genre that is all encompassing bridges a gap in students' understanding of rhetoric as practice instead of enigma. Poetry is that common ground for reading, writing, listening, and speaking to which more students should be acquainted with. My term poetic literacy is defined as the range of observed and absorbed resources that human beings experience and share to produce a similar or dissimilar experience in a variety of forms. Using this term as a framework for the instruction of literacy through poetic exercises enhances students' abilities to navigate the bounds of their native language. I offer prompts for writing exercises that explore rhetorical practices. Shifting the focus from analysis and onlooker to explorative creation and rhetor provides more opportunities for rhetorical discussions in the classroom.

I can't help but wonder what an immense impact a reinstitutionalization and emphasis on instruction through poetic discourses could have on the general populace in generating more humanistic and productive thinkers in the world. The issue at hand is the rhetorical value that poetry has in instruction and development of students' comprehension of their native language. In Deborah Brandt's article, "Accumulating Literacy" she discusses the disparity of literacy as language evolves, stating that "literate ability at the end of the twentieth century may be best measured as a person's capacity to amalgamate new reading and writing practices in response to rapid social change" (651). Brandt's premonition is evident in the ever-evolving generations who are tasked with navigating new technologies, mediums, and means of communication every two to three years. Students are required to develop communication practices in multiple genres and

platforms in order to succeed academically in both secondary and post-secondary education. Our society is constantly experiencing rapid social change in regard to our new technologies, trends, and communication practices. Since the technology and means of communication is ever-evolving it strains the students of each upcoming generation to continually amalgamate new practices of communication. Furthermore, these new horizons of communication overwhelm and dominate the field of vision for scholars as we all desperately analyze the newest applications' interfaces, a newer medium is derived. Reaching students as they explore these technologies is far more cumbersome on teachers' ability to grapple and evolve with the same technologies. The past two years alone are evident as the pandemic swept through old curriculum and replaced it with thousands of modules, leaving teachers bereft of their educational role and pushed into unkempt shoes of the facilitator, security monitor, and stringent gatekeeper.

Rhetorical studies expand with each new social interaction epistemically constructing itself as the communities begin, develop, and end. The increased demand for teachers' instruction in the classroom to be present and somehow more distracting than the students' array of technological devices has created a destitute situation. Many teachers even resort to all together negligent instructional practices relying heavily on independent modules to replace their teaching role. This increased distinction between what is possible and rhetorical within the classroom comes with a variety of new challenges that have not been considered or addressed. I do not argue or claim that technology should be stripped from educational settings but merely suggest that its presence be acknowledged as an entity, tool, and resource. Technology is a means of developing skills for education and should not necessarily replace the dissemination of education. Teachers struggle to maintain a productive learning environment filled with student engagement. If educators were to acknowledge technology as an entity, tool, and resource, students would be more readily engaged with the material rather than habitually running through online modules.

These new challenges resonate with Krista Ratcliffe's article "Redefining Rhetorical Listening," where she describes the divorcing of rhetorics and the importance of their resurgence in modern and contemporary rhetorical studies:

Rhetorical listening functions as a response to Royster's call for "codes of cross-cultural conduct" ("Borderlands"). Royster's question and call are important because they pinpoint a lack of scholarly interest in listening within contemporary rhetoric and composition studies. What accounts for this lack? After all, for more than two thousand years, the four rhetorical arts of reading, writing, speaking, and listening were cornerstones of Western rhetorical studies (Murphy, "Rhetorical History" 5, 11). But in the early twentieth century, these arts were separated from one another during the divorce of English studies from communication studies. (17-18)

The divorce is important in two contexts: 1) understanding that the only way to read and write is to read and write and 2) re-establishing poetic language as both accessible and academically efficient in instruction. Addressing these contexts in the divorce is one sure step to reuniting each of these rhetorical attributes; listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Technological advancements mend and conflate some of these rhetorical principles, for example, videos can be analyzed as a text, and speech to text can be included as an assignment. Technology's conflation of the rhetorical arts buries the attributes' individual purposes and effects. By remarrying these rhetorical principles through poetry exercises, educators enhance the participation and expression of the students.

I argue that poetry is the productive genre and form to begin the remarrying of these ideals. Poetry offers a reunion of these rhetorical arts where each attribute increases the depth of the effect whereas in technological conflation, these attributes are hidden in the form. As teachers make evident the rhetorical principles that go along with self-expression, for example, that of poetic self-expression, educators may also pave a path for understanding which students sometimes feel detached from. Poetic instruction to teach rhetorical practices is not just a technique for remarrying the rhetorical attributes but also as a response to technological advancements in the classroom. Poetic instruction requires the active invention and creation of text from the students which inherently bolsters students' engagement with the writing curriculum rather than sauntering through modules.

Another process within this communion is the growth of poetic literacies as Antonio Byrd argues in his article, "Like Coming Home."

> The need to grow repertories of literacies matters especially for low-income racially marginalized adults, as they must navigate systemic racism that prevents their accessing new literacies that may promote their social advancement or their own survival. (427)

While Byrd is speaking directly about the socio-economic climb and trapeze stunt that many marginalized individuals face, the survival of students' future literacies depends on their access to those literacies. We as a collective group of educators ought to also "grow repertories" to explore other ideas while staying true to the content/curriculum created in the classroom. Byrd discusses the use of technology as a leveling tool, "[s]imilar to other scholars, Bogost argues that computer programming can be a vehicle for conceptualizing "the process of grammatical learning in general, and it helps create adults who are able to express themselves through technology" ("Procedural" 33)" (428). Consider the use of technology to create communal art activities which help student collaborators to develop a deeper connection between their peers and a better understanding of

the community with which they identify. Utilizing the technological resources that often conflate rhetorical attributes of reading, writing, speaking, and listening will enhance classroom participation if also paired with poetic exercises.

A Lesson Plan

Students approached poetry in high school as a mystery that is riddled with secrets that are ultimately unattainable. As instructed in secondary education, students are typically given tools to "SIFT" the poem in an attempt to understand the hidden meanings and techniques employed in classical and traditional poetry. "SIFT" is an acronym taught in some high school English courses which work as a step-by-step process of identification; Speaker, Images, Figurative Language, and Theme/Tone. Rather than looking at poems with the purpose of building a creative perspective, the responses were rigid, expected, and lacked encouragement for creative expression or interpretation. As a future educator, rhetorician, and current poet, I wanted to discover opportunities for which I can implement and bolster students' agency through a creative form of expression.

Poetic literacy is the basis of my proposed lesson plan. Defining poetic literacy is formed from multiple ideas. Debra Hawhee's article, "Rhetorics, Bodies, and Everyday Life" refers to Wayne Boothe's definition of Rhetoric as "the entire range of resources that human beings share for producing effects on one another" (158). The entire range includes all items in a person's identity and history on Earth—even lived experiences and collections of knowledge about how to interact with the rhetorical world around them. Hawhee embellishes Boothe's quote to argue for the inclusion of the physical bodies we have in the rhetorical world:

> So it is a definition that doesn't worry about disciplinary purchase on "the word," "the image," or even "the body," but rather sees words, images, and bodies as all part of the rhetorical enterprise-the range of resources-for producing effects. (Hawhee 159)

In accordance with the separation that Hawhee identifies, I argue that there is an inclusionary effect as poetry resides more often in the liminal mind space when we read or literally analyze a text. Poetry in creation resides in the physical body, in our minds and thoughts, and is sponsored by the rhetorical histories we carry with every word written, spoken, heard, and read. My working definition of poetic literacy, along with Hawhee's ruminations of rhetoric, extends to: The range of observed and absorbed resources that human beings experience and share to produce a similar or dissimilar experience in a variety of forms.

Further identifying the setting for which literacy occurs, Korina Jocson's chapter, "Literacy Learning, Empowerment and Poetry" shares that "literacy manifests through an event or a particular time and space (occasion) where

people (participants) interact with or interpret texts" (16). Therefore a "literacy event" can be described as the manifestation or existence of literacy in practice. The phrasing, "in practice" is specific because one of Jocson's points is to separate the two ideas. Literacy isn't a singular networked practice for all the interactions we've ever had in a particular context. It is multiple iterations and interactions each epistemically building our literacy in specific social or rhetorical exchanges. Literacy is demonstrated through social interaction between one individual and the outside stimuli of other texts (spoken, written, or behavioral). Each of the exercises below includes and provides hundreds of literacy event opportunities. Exploring the necessity of the development of poetic literacy as part of the secondary education and post-secondary education curriculum encourages a more connected future. This experiential learning through exploration of poetic literacy resituates the student to actively engage in the classroom rather than passively completing weekly quizzes.

Consider again my definition of poetic literacy: The range of observed and absorbed resources that human beings experience and share to produce a similar or dissimilar experience in a variety of forms. By breaking down this definition into segments, teachers can begin to address building specific items of literacy with their students. The following sections of this article offer up writing prompts in poetry that teachers of rhetoric can use to build poetic literacy in their students. These prompts are suggested writing exercises that can be implemented in writing courses intermittently and do not require a large adjustment from pre-planned curriculum. The prompts are split up into sections of my definition of poetic literacy to help key into the central ideas and concepts presented in the defined term. Starting with, "the range of observed and absorbed resources," followed by "that human beings experience and share," and "to produce a similar or dissimilar experience," ending with "in a variety of forms." I provide context and explanation for each of these sections to identify what is meant by the definition and then provide exercises specific to each section of the term poetic literacy.

"The range of observed and absorbed resources":

Many writing instructional manuals will suggest to readers "to *write what you know*." What *you know* can be categorized as resources that are both observed and absorbed. The absorbed resources may refer to experiences seen, felt, or known to the student. The feeling of wet grass stamped into scraped knees or the sight of a bird taking flight. The familiar streets of a hometown neighborhood and the ominous visits to the dentist's office. These things are known, felt, and seen by the students to some capacity or another. While the observed resources are experiences not held by memory of the student but constrained by imagination or abstraction. The observed resources are usually not experiences in which the student was present or participating in. These resources also refer to the materials used and knowledge gained through poetic exercise. Knowing the difference between literary terms and being able to identify where the "heat" in

the poem is as Danez Smith likes to say. Of course, exploring the literary world of the library and delving into the written word carried by other great authors. These observed and absorbed resources are mostly acquired through a combination of reading and living.

Prompts for observing and absorbing resources:

• Instruct the students to write about a memory they have that they like. Tell them to describe the colors in the memory. Invite them to recall the sounds of that memory. What sort of emotions did they have in the memory, what emotions do they have now?

• Allow the students to write about an object in the classroom. This can be physical, digital, conceptual, or metaphysical. Remember that students want guidance but require little constraint for these exercises. What does the object feel like when they touch it? Is it heavy or light, colorful or gray? What does the object do?

• Challenge the students to write a synonym after explaining to them what a synonym is and what it does. If they're having trouble coming up with synonyms give some examples. Talk about the synonyms they write and point out the rhetorical and poetic value of those words.

"that human beings experience and share":

As a younger student, I would always conclude each essay with a few sentences about how we are all humans and isn't it great that we're alive?! While my arguments about whether to use paper bags or plastic bags didn't strike hard with that conclusion, I still think it is important to level the playing field with your students. We are experiencing new things all the time and then we tell people about it! We share stories with our friends and families about the adventures, boredom, and crazy things that happened during the day. The important part of poetic literacy is that students share these observed and absorbed resources or experiences. When they share with one another, they participate in a conversation with the world around them.

Prompts for sharing experiences:

• Encourage students to share their work after a free-write exercise. Free write exercises can be useful because the students are only constrained by time. When a student shares their work it is vital that you rhetorically listen to their work. Identify ways that their work is growing and help build a constructive community. Any suggestions should be made with the lens of exploration not remediation. For example, "I wonder what would happen if you explored _____?"

• Provide space for students to share their experiences from the past week. This encourages students to participate and share about their lives outside

school or even extracurriculars they may be involved with. Encouraging students to explore the world outside of school helps to build their appreciation for these experiences. The more they share the more they will begin to really observe and absorb their experiences so that they are prepared to share with the class.

• Stray away from forcing students to share. Some teachers misstep and gloss over students' shared experiences. Encourage and engage with the student no matter how ridiculous an experience may sound. In order to build poetic literacy, the students need to feel as though they are given the space to explore. Ask them about an experience they hope they can have one day. They might write about going to a theme park or an outdoor activity but what is important is that the students address what experiences they haven't had yet and wish to know.

"to produce a similar or dissimilar experience":

One of the reasons for sharing these experiences aside from the satisfaction of storytelling is to create or produce a vivid enough story that the readers or listeners are able to almost feel that they themselves have also experienced this story. A poem about a waterfall should produce the image with enough sensory detail that the reader can visualize and experience the cascading mineral water flowing from the page. However, bringing it back to the fact that students are all experiencing life uniquely, there is a clear need for a large number of records detailing a single experience because they can feel or be different for different people. Likewise, students will find that sometimes meaning is made when students work to use the form that does not represent or coincide with the theme of the content. For example, Claude McKay's poem, "The Lynching" written in the form of a sonnet which exacts rhetorical meaning due largely to the fact that the dissonance in form and content is so stark.

Prompts for producing similar and dissimilar experiences:

• Provide the students with a video, interaction, or image which depicts something in nature or society. Invite at least two students to write about the experience and describe the item that you shared. Inform them that they will share with the class. Compare and contrast the responses with the class how the same experience can be different. Both experiences are valid, both are important.

• In order to create experiences past the point of narration and summary, we will want to look at imagery. Have students describe the sensory details that they are experiencing in the room right now. Are they cold? Is their chair comfortable? What color are the walls, their shoes, or their bags? What can they hear? A dull scratching of pencils, or a cacophony of keyboard typing? What can they smell? The burnt-out end of an eraser dusted over the paper? The puffed cloud of chalk dust floating across the room? What can they

taste? Mint gum chewed two hours too long? Water, soda, or tea from their canister?

• Once you've explored imagery refer back to a memory exercise and see if students can implement the same principles in their old writing of memories. Allow them to mingle and mix ideas, they might decide to conflate two memories into one and share the taste of vanilla ice cream while fishing at the pond. Let them share these experiences and investigate whether the other students listening can feel, see, touch, hear, or smell what the writing can conjure.

"in a variety of forms":

A variety of forms refers to the hundreds of different types of poems students can write. For most of the free-write exercises outlined above the students are encouraged to explore different forms. Forms refer to the construction of the poem in terms of line count, rhythm, rhyme scheme, and other mechanical features of the poem. For instance, the haiku consists of three lines with the first line amounting to five syllables, followed by seven syllables for the second line, and ending with five syllables. However, form does not refer only to the mechanical features, many poems also carry traditional histories that associate themes with forms. Considering the Haiku again, they typically revolve around nature or depict some natural phenomenon in the world. Having a variety of forms and their "requirements" helps the students to explore language and experiences within a limited space. The limitations challenge students to fit their experiences in a well-constructed form but with practice and thorough exploration, the form can enhance meaning.

Prompts for exploring a variety of forms:

• It may be beneficial to introduce a form to the class every week. These forms can help give the students structure to their writing experiences and will challenge them to meet limitations of a genre. This is extremely important to build poetic literacy because it helps to diversify and evolve the students' ability to address a prompt. Introducing the form and giving a prime example of the form helps to indicate to the students a model for creation.

• Encourage students to talk about forms and which ones they like or dislike and why. Many will flee to the free verse or blank verse form but soon they may find it more difficult because of its lack of parameters. Discussing the forms as a map and guide with the students can help bring form out of intimidation. Each student should attempt a form at least once as they explore this literacy, though they may always return to other preferred forms.

• Lastly, challenge students to take a poem that they have written in one form and rewrite the same essence of the poem into a new form. For instance, they

might take a sonnet they wrote a few weeks back and then rewrite the poem into a burning haibun. This will strengthen the students' knowledge of the form as a container for the experience. You can then have discussion about the effect that forms have on the experiences which they contain. The poem about sea sickness when written as a prose poem may become about being in love with the sea if rewritten in the form of a sonnet.

Why and What for?:

If given the opportunity to explore language with a creative lens many students will excel in developing multiple literacies beyond the ability to read and write. They will understand how a language can develop meaning and soon be able to not just point to where a device might be used but utilize the resources that they have observed and absorbed through their exploration. The students will engage and explore the bounds of their classroom with greater participation. These exercises respond to a dire need for educators to engage more readily with their students. Students' strained abilities to navigate the revolving technological advancements require that they respond to each new idea quickly and grow their repertoires. Poetic literacy can provide a foundation for students to adapt and invent new communication practices within the bounds of these technological advancements with greater ease. Exploring communication practices in technology is paramount to their success as contributors to society but communication based in analysis provides a limited scope. Many people claim that the only way to read and write is to read and write. I do not argue against such a truth. I merely suggest that oftentimes our ability to write is mostly evaluated by our analyses. I suggest that educators could see similar success in the development of writing skills with an emphasis on creation and exploration. One cannot be without the other, creation cannot nor should it exist without useful and productive analysis. If we as educators shift our focus and emphasis on analysis to a focus on explorative agency and self-expression, many students will grow their repertoires and participate in larger discourses as participants of the community rather than simply observers, onlookers, or analysts. Poetic literacy building uniquely positions the students to understand their native language with greater depth because it allows for such exploration to take place. As a rhetorician, educator, and artist, I propose that other rhetoricians, educators, and artists observe and absorb the range of resources around them to produce similar and dissimilar experiences of education for their students by exploring a variety of instructional forms.

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Jarrett Webster is a senior English Literature student graduating with a minor in Writing and Rhetoric this May 2022. Jarrett has published work(s) in *Imprint Magazine*, *Just Write!*, and *Cypress Dome*. Continuing his education in graduate school he will be studying Rhetoric and Composition to one day direct a university writing center.