



Healing Ourselves, Healing the World through Poetry

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Introduction

Can poems change the world? Carl Jung reportedly said that no social change is possible without personal individual change. I believe students and teachers can fruitfully explore thoughts, feelings, events, actions, ideas and history through poetry together in the classroom.

Scholars such as Leedy (2006), Alschuler (2006) and Mazza (2003) claim that reading, writing and sharing poems with others in a group setting can lead to improved self-esteem, an increased awareness of self and others, enhanced creative problem-solving abilities, better communication skills, better perspective taking and an expanded view of life.

In addition to teaching university courses in American poetry, British poetry and comparative poetry, I use poems in many of my global issues theme-based required EFL and other courses to introduce topics such as war, gender, animal rights, environmental destruction, homelessness, poverty, mental illness and others to my intermediate level English students majoring in education.

Poems can be short, fun, thought-provoking, meaningful and memorable. They lend themselves well to group discussions, critical thinking, and to speaking, listening, pronunciation, reading and writing activities. They can even be used for grammar practice to highlight key structures.

In this article, I will offer examples of poems for global issues education that I have used in class, with comments about how I've used poetry and how students have reacted to this instruction.

Teaching about war using poems

There is no shortage of poems in English about war, many accessible to the intermediate level English learner. One example is *Wisdom and War* by Langston Hughes, which can easily be found on the web. This poem is 14 lines long, and each line only two to four words in length, so the length is within the still linguistically developing Japanese learner range. Furthermore, the language used is very simple. For copyright reasons, I will excerpt the beginning of the poem, only:

We do not care -
That much is clear.
Not enough
Of us care
Anywhere.

We are not wise -
For that reason,
Mankind dies.

After pointing out that the current word is now "humankind" versus "mankind" (Hughes' poem was written decades ago), one way I have used this poem in class is to ask students to read it and then discuss the meaning of the poem in a small group. Subsequently, I ask students to discuss with their partners questions such as: *Do you agree that people don't care? Why or why not? Do you think war is a result of a lack of human wisdom? What are the causes of war, in your opinion? What are some solutions to or alternatives to war?*

A follow up activity can be to have students write about what they think are the causes of or solutions to war, and/or to compose their own short poems in English related to war or peace.

A more challenging example is the sonnet *next to of course god america i* by e. e. cummings, available at www.poemhunter.com/ or in English with Japanese translation in Kamei & Kawamoto (2006). Yet another, which can be found on the Internet, is Allen Ginsberg's *HUM BOM!* I frequently use audio recordings of Ginsberg and Cummings reading these poems aloud in class because they make for lively listening practice (both poets were accomplished performers).

For teachers interested in probing further, there are many anthologies of war poetry in English and also bilingually (Japanese and English, especially related to the atomic bombings). The internet provides the cheapest and easiest way of finding poems for class lessons for the busy global educationalist. Anthologies of Japanese poetry in English that include poems about war include Arthur Binard's *Nihon no mei shi, eigo de odoru* (2007) and *Tanoshii inazuma* edited by Hajime Kijima (1998). Another favorite book, in English, is Fishman's anthology of Holocaust poetry (2007).

Teaching about gender using poems

Also at www.poemhunter.com is a poem titled *Homage to My Hips* by the recently deceased African American poet Lucille Clifton. It begins:

these hips are big hips.
they need space to
move around in.
they don't fit into little
petty places. these hips
are free hips.
they don't like to be held back.
these hips have never been enslaved

The entire poem is not very long. Although it's linguistically simple, some students will not at first understand why the speaker is "proud" of having large hips. Students in cooperative learning groups can help each other understand its message - that a woman need not be petite or slim, that she can/should be proud of who she is no matter what size she is, that conventional standards of (female) beauty are limited and artificial, that being large may have advantages (and that the speaker is proud of her African American heritage!).

Another poem I have used successfully in class is *Viva Lesbians* from the anthology *other side river* (1995). Because it brings up many interesting themes in a few stanzas, such as the so-called "comfort women" (World War II sexual slavery), Koreans in Japan, and lesbianism, the post-reading discussion tends to be very valuable and I find students discuss it with much enthusiasm. Post- or pre-reading activities can include student research about the issues raised as well as writing activities.

Other poems I have used include poems by women about domestic violence such as *In the Fist of Your Hatred* and excerpts from *The Prologue* by Anne Bradstreet, both easily found online.

Teaching about racism using poems

In addition to books, I use or have students use websites such as Poets.org, Wikipedia and PoemHunter.com to find poems, poets, biographical information or historical contexts to learn more fully about issues raised in poems.

The book *othersideriver* has poems in English translation from the Japanese, for example, that refer to Ainu and Korean residents of Japan. Many anthologies group together poets and poems by minority status, gender, etc. from a variety of countries for teachers interested in searching for more poems on racism, ethnicity or ethnic identity.

The poets Langston Hughes and Lucille Clifton are two of many African American poets who have written accessible poems about racism (and other themes). There are many others, one being Maya Angelou, who has many poems on the Internet. One of my students found Angelou's poem *Still I Rise*. This poem ends:

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear, I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear, I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise. I rise. I rise.

My student found this easy to analyze without help so it may be a good poem for a class lesson if your students are intermediate level like mine.

Gwendolyn Brooks is another well known African American poet whose work I have used in class and whose poetry can be found easily on internet.

Teaching about nuclear energy and responding to the Tohoku/Fukushima disaster with poems

In April 2011 students in my poetry courses were instructed, on the first day of classes, to write a poem together with a classmate (by alternating writing lines on a single sheet of paper) about an event in the news, such as the Tohoku earthquake/tsunami or Fukushima power plant disaster. Many chose to write poems about the earthquake which were shared with the whole class. Follow-up activities included discussing our feelings about the events as well as discussing how student volunteers can take part in relief efforts.

In one class, we read a famous poem by the well-known poet Miyazawa Kenji, a vegetarian from Iwate Prefecture concerned with human rights whose biography may be read in English at Wikipedia. The poem, titled "Ame ni mo Makezu" is available in both English and its original Japanese at the website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ame_ni_mo_Makezu.

This poem is useful for values clarification and discussing volunteerism. Students in my class wrote poems (many were quite moving) about the person they wish to become, after discussing this one. The post-reading discussion can be linked to volunteering to help relief efforts in Japan since helping others is the theme of the poem.

A poem I use in my American poetry course is *Power* by Adrienne Rich (at www.americanpoems.com as well as on the *Voice Of the Poet: Adrienne Rich* audio-book CD). The second stanza reads:

Today I was reading about Marie Curie:
she must have known she suffered from
radiation sickness
her body bombarded for years by the element
she had purified
It seems she denied to the end
the source of the cataracts on her eyes
the cracked, suppurating skin of her finger-ends
till she could no longer hold a test-tube
or a pencil

This poem can prompt a discussion about the history of radiation and effects of radioactivity, the latter much in the news since the Fukushima power plant accident.

When discussing radiation, students may be interested in selections from Japanese atomic bomb literature. I have used many such works in class; for example, "Skinning Tomatoes" in *Masako's Story* by Otake (2007). The English translation is well within

the linguistic grasp of my intermediate level students. It is just one of many poems which graphically depict the suffering of atomic bomb survivors (in this poem, people whose flesh is falling from their bones after the atom bombs are compared to skinned tomatoes).

Other global issues themes and poetry

Poems deal with other global issues topics such as environmental destruction and animal rights. Hajime's bilingual (Japanese-English) anthology *Tanoshii inazuma* (1998) is one source I have used frequently for suitable poems about some of these topics. For example, it has a six line poem titled *Dobutsutachi no osoroshii yume no naka ni* (*In the fearful dreams of animals*) which invites the reader to take the perspective of animals:

in those fearful
dreams of animals
let not the humans appear, I pray

and the poem *Chiisa na wakusei* (*Little planet*) by Shiraishi Kazuko, a mediation on human destruction of the planet in the 21st century. Poems about homelessness or written by homeless persons can be found online as can poems about just about any world or social issue.

More advanced students might enjoy excerpts from poetry books such as Nowak (2004) and Hogue (2010) about U.S. factory worker rights and Hurricane Katrina as further examples of the relation of poetry and activism, or Schultz's 2008 book about her mother's dementia. In an interview with me (to be available online soon), Hogue commented that for her writing and reading poems was a way of learning to be less judgmental!

Beyond the Poem

My students are interested to learn that many poets, now and in the past, have been activists for a variety of issues including GLBT rights, peace, the environment, women's rights and racial equality. Wikipedia and Poets.org contain biographical information on famous poets that students can use for their own related speeches and reports. This year there have been numerous events in Japan organized by writers to raise money for Tohoku relief. An international event that I'm taking part in personally this year is called *100,000 Poets for Change*: www.bigbridge.org/100thousandpoetsforchange/.

Conclusion

My students tend to react very favorably to poems in the classroom, so long as the poems are not so challenging as to frustrate them. In general, they

like the brevity and musicality of poems, and thinking, talking and writing about the ideas in poems. Students overwhelmingly claim in course evaluations that writing and sharing their own poems, which we do after studying model poems, is very useful and enjoyable. This sharing of student work is additionally a way of having students get to know each other, which I believe helps create a more friendly and humanistic global issues classroom environment. Students can also increase their understanding of foreign cultures and diverse viewpoints by attempting to take the perspective of speakers in poems and, in some cases, learning about the poem's author or the poem's historical context. They also learn to share each other's perspectives by reading and responding to each other's original work in class.

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