

The Road Less Traveled: Poetry and Videotape in a Developmental Reading Class

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Developmental reading students respond positively to poetry. This genre engages them and intimidates less than prose. Reading poetry aloud further improves their reading skills because students feel compelled to increase their knowledge and abilities and to pay closer attention to the text when they are required to perform. Videotaping performances heightens this desire to read well and allows students to assess their abilities when viewing the tape.

Poetry is a powerful tool educators use to instill knowledge and appreciation of the English language in their students. It can be used with great effect with developmental students. In 2002, 11% of all college students were enrolled in developmental reading (Parsad, Lewis, & Greene, 2003). Given the high number of students who need help in this area and the fact that many developmental students are not always motivated learners, it is critical to find ways to engage them. But poetry is often underutilized in the developmental classroom and courses that do teach poetry rarely take advantage of the performance element that is part of the genre. Reading, analyzing, and discussing poetry is only the first step. Reading poetry aloud makes students read more carefully and pay closer attention to the poems and their various elements. Videotaping students' oral reading of poetry only increases their focus on the literature. Taping students reading poetry aloud greatly enhances their learning experiences in the developmental reading classroom.

READING AND TAPING POETRY

Why teach poetry? Poetry is effective because students often find it more interesting and less intimidating than prose. The genre works particularly well with developmental students who are not comfortable with reading and cringe at the thought of having to read a whole book. Reading an entire book is a daunting task, but reading a poem, even if it is several pages in length, is infinitely more feasible. Additionally, poetry appeals to many of our students who grew up with hip hop and rap music. They like the rhythm and rhyme of poetry. And the fact that the meaning of a poem is subjective makes them comfortable too because there is no one “right” answer. (Of course this is true with prose as well, but most students have been so conditioned to find the “correct answer” when reading prose that they cannot believe that all forms of literature are subjective.) All of these factors help to engage our students and make them more at ease with the written word.

Reading poetry opens up a whole new world for students. While most poetry assignments start and stop with silent reading, the genre lends itself to being read aloud. Indeed, many poems were written for oral performance. Reading aloud in class forces students to pay closer attention to the poems in front of them, if for no other reason than they are performing in front of their peers. By reading aloud students can hear themselves which helps them identify problems and monitor progress (Opitz, Rasinki, & Bird, 1998). Oral reading gives students a deeper appreciation of the way a poem sounds, its rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia, and other elements. It makes reading the poem a richer experience for the reader and allows his peers to enjoy it as an audience. Reading aloud improves students’ confidence and competence (Ash, 2002). To heighten this effect and to give students an opportunity to view their work and improvement, videotaping readers is a fun way to get students excited about reading.

THE POETRY PROJECT

During the spring 2007 term we conducted a study to determine how students reacted to reading aloud and to being videotaped

reading aloud. The students in one developmental reading class were our subjects. This reading course is designed to introduce students to strategies needed for college-level reading. Although we started with 16 students, only eight were able to complete the course. The class began a poetry unit approximately at midterm. The reading teacher was assisted by a colleague who helped design and implement the study. Both instructors were regularly in the classroom throughout the term. By mid semester they had built a rapport with the students and the students were comfortable with them and with each other. This made it easier for the students to read aloud in class and, ultimately, before a video camera. The poetry unit started with several sessions of discussion and analysis. Students were given a number of poems to analyze, both individually and in groups. They were instructed to look for imagery, similes, metaphors, new vocabulary, symbolism, and other elements. The poems they analyzed also served as topics for their writing journals. Students were able to work through the poems with their peers and then could reflect on the poetry in writing.

Once the students had been introduced to poetry, they were required to choose their own poems. They were instructed to pick a poem they would analyze, discuss, write about, and read aloud. This part of the assignment began with a trip to the library. Many of our students (especially those in their first semester of college) had never been to the campus library and were unfamiliar with how it “works.” A class visit to the library got them into the building and gave us an opportunity to show them where the various types of books were located and how to use the online catalogue. Students were told to choose a poem they liked and felt comfortable with. Since the poems they looked at tended to be brief, they often read several before choosing one that they liked. Once they had decided on a poem, they were required to check out the book it was in and were encouraged to examine the book as a whole and gain a general understanding of the author and his work.

The next phase of the assignment was for the class to gather in a circle and talk about the poems, authors, and books they had

chosen. During these discussions, students were allowed to read their poems if they wished. Listening to both the poetry and the discussion helped them develop listening comprehension and vocabulary. Several students eagerly volunteered to read, while others did not want to read at all. The instructors took part in this exercise discussing their poems and reading them aloud modeling good reading and verbalization skills. This practice allowed students to read in a supportive environment which increased their comfort and competence in reading. The instructors' participation demonstrated several things for the students: possible elements to analyze in a poem, types of questions to ask, and how to read poetry orally. This exercise also exposed students to different poets and different types of poetry. One of the highlights of this activity was that several of our international students read or recited poems in their native languages. Thus, we were treated to poetry in Spanish, Arabic, and Korean. This was an especially valuable experience for the native Arkansans who had never strayed far from their rural homes.

WRITING POETRY

Students were next asked to use what they learned in these class discussions to write their own poems. The assignment was very general. They were given a theme that related to their ability to take control of their lives. Students were told they would have an opportunity to read their work aloud before a video camera if they wished to. Our students enjoyed writing poetry. Although some of their poems were simplistic, others showed effort and careful thought. Some students had already written poetry or rap music on their own and welcomed the chance to do it as a class assignment. The influence of rap could be seen in the rhythms of some of the poems and again later in the students' performances of their work.

Poetry writing was a popular assignment because students liked the flexibility of poetry - the lack of a fixed length, the discretion of using meter and rhyme, etc. And they appreciated the subject because it was one that they knew well, themselves, their development, and their potential. While some of the student work

was shallow and silly, some of it was very expressive and personal. Our students' poetry gave us insights into their lives and helped us appreciate what rough backgrounds some of them come from. Through their poetry they showed us how frightening both college and early adulthood can be. Sharing their feelings gave the students ownership of the class. They felt vested in it. Additionally, writing their own poetry took the mystique out of the genre for some of them and made them more at ease with the poems they read and heard in class.

READING POETRY ALOUD

To prepare our students for the final phase of the unit, reading poetry aloud before a video camera, we played them an episode of the HBO program *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*. The show featured a variety of poets reading their work. Students were told to focus on the poets' presentation: their enunciation, pace, body movements, facial expressions, etc. Afterwards we discussed reading poetry as a type of performance asking them to think about how they would read their poem to bring out its meaning and emotion.

Students were required to read aloud the poems they had chosen before a video camera and were also allowed to read poems they had written if they wanted. To reduce student anxiety, they were not graded on their performances but were merely given participation points for completing the exercise. Students were informed that this would be the case when the videotaping activity was first discussed. But knowing they were going to be taped and that the tape would later be played to the entire class, most students rehearsed and carefully read their poems. They paid attention to enunciation, pronunciation, and rhythm. They also showed a greater interest in comprehending their poems and in being able to analyze them. In short, they read with much more attention and care, both in rehearsal and when performing on camera, than they ever would have if they had just read the poems silently. For example, students were more concerned with the poems' vocabulary – they no longer ignored the words they did not know. They had to at least know how

to pronounce unfamiliar words and they usually wanted to know their meanings. This knowledge made them more comfortable with their poems and thus more prepared to perform them. Similarly, they wanted to make sure they understood their poems and so their comprehension increased. Oral reading also directed them to notice the rhyme patterns of poetry and try to capture them in their presentations. Reading aloud before a camera forced our students to pay closer attention to the texts they were working with.

When everyone had been taped reading, we viewed the tape together as a class. Watching the tape gave the students an opportunity to see and hear themselves recite the poems they had chosen. They were able to listen and determine what was good and bad about their performances and were able to learn from their mistakes. Although students were sometimes critical of themselves, they were very supportive and encouraging of their peers. Everyone found it entertaining and watching the tape proved to be a welcome break at the end of the semester.

ASSESSMENT

The final step was to survey the class about their reactions to poetry in general and to the various exercises we did with poetry. The surveys were anonymous and our students were encouraged to be honest. We were pleasantly surprised with the results. Only one student reported hating poetry, hated reading it silently or aloud, and did not like being videotaped. Although a few other students had some negative comments, the majority were neutral or positive about the poetry unit and the exercises within it. Several students commented that they learned about themselves as readers because of the videotaping – it made them aware of their weaknesses. Unfortunately we had only eight students in the course by the end of the poetry unit to survey. But six of the eight reported that the video taping exercise made them better readers. And one of the dissenters claimed that the exercise did not improve his reading ability because he did not practice enough at home. The majority felt the activity allowed them to see and hear how well they read and to identify areas in which they needed improvement.

When we first developed the idea of videotaping students reading poetry aloud, we tested the waters by posting a query on a listserv dedicated to teaching developmental students. We were surprised that the small number of respondents all vehemently opposed the idea. They made dire predictions about crushing our students' fragile egos. Students who could not read well would hate reading aloud and would refuse to do it in front of a video camera. In fact the opposite was true. Generally, the poorest readers in the class enjoyed the video exercise the most, albeit for the wrong reasons. These students tended to have behavioral problems and constantly demanded attention from their instructors and fellow students. Putting them in front of a camera fed this need. They loved performing and being able to watch themselves later. None of the students in this category were the least bit concerned with their reading ability or lack thereof.

IMPROVEMENTS

Although our project went well and we were satisfied with the results, there is always room for improvement. The next time we videotape students reading we plan to tape them more often. Because of time constraints we only had two taping sessions and viewed the entire tape as a class at the end of the poetry unit. Because of the small number of students, everyone had the chance to read at least once. But they would have benefited from additional tapings. More frequent videotaping and viewing of their performances would have allowed each student to better assess his work, monitor his progress, and build his confidence. Students would have more opportunity to see their growth as readers. Additionally, we would like to experiment with videotaping students reading genres besides poetry. When surveyed, our students indicated they would like to read speeches, plays, news articles, and short stories, among other things, before the camera. To some extent the type of material read is unimportant; viewing their taped performances allows students to assess their strengths and weaknesses regardless of what they read. It would be nice to give students a greater choice of materials to read

before the camera. This would give students more opportunities to read something they were interested in and enjoyed while still achieving the ultimate goal – to improve reading proficiency.

IMPLICATIONS

These poetry exercises, like the entire course, have a higher goal: to enable students to read on a college level. Reading poetry aloud and before a video camera develops skills that students can apply to their reading assignments in any course. Firstly, these activities help students become more focused readers. By having to read aloud students are forced to read every word; they become aware of which words and concepts they do not understand and realize the importance of elements such as word order, punctuation, change of font or font size, use of bold, italics, underline, etc. They learn how to identify what problems they have with the text and how to overcome those difficulties. These abilities are crucial for any type of reading.

Similarly, these reading exercises improve students' ability to analyze a text. Bearing the responsibility of reading before an audience and a camera made our students want to understand their poems. As a result they paid close attention to the words and their meanings, asked many questions about the text, and discussed the text's meaning. Rather than giving it a cursory skim and taking the words at face value, they engaged in critical thinking and tried to determine the author's intent as well as their own personal interpretation of the texts. These are skills that are necessary to read any college level textbook.

CONCLUSION

Developmental students are often reluctant to read. Therefore, it is crucial to find a way to reach and engage them. If they are not interested in the reading material, many of them simply will not read. Threats of failure, having to repeat the course, or even expulsion due to poor grades have little effect. But many of these same students respond positively to poetry. They do not consider it

to be boring or threatening - responses they often have to prose.

Reading, writing, and discussing poetry help students develop their reading and analytical skills in a manner that is comfortable for many of them. Videotaping them reading poetry adds another layer: it forces them to pay closer attention to all aspects of the poems they are working with. Comprehension, vocabulary, syntax, and punctuation all take on new importance when students realize they will read their poems aloud; these elements have even greater significance when that reading is taped. In addition, the videotaping exercise lets students contribute to the course and gives them some ownership of the class. By the time we reached this final phase of the poetry unit, students had worked with their poems a great deal, were familiar with them, and were often anxious to be taped reading them and to share their performances with the class.

Of course reading poetry, reading it aloud, and videotaping are not panaceas. None of these tools can reach every student or solve every problem. There will always be some students who will hate one or more of these activities and be reluctant to participate. But that is true of every assignment and every text. Given the strong positive response from our students, especially from some of our poorest readers, it is apparent that the advantages of using the taping exercise far outweigh the disadvantages. Videotaping students reading poetry may be the road less traveled, but for our students it is one that has made a tremendous difference.

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