

Poetry Re-Imagined: Reading and Writing Poetry in the Social Studies

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Helps outline our understanding
of past and current events
Is the journal that holds details
about our
Society, our community and our
country it
Transforms learners from
Ordinary or average learners to
Righteous, enlightened
Young adults

Does poetry have a place in social studies instruction? We, as literacy educators, believe poetry serves as an important outlet for personal reflection and statements of social justice. Additionally, we find that it helps develop students' reading and writing skills while building their social studies content knowledge.

In our personal lives, many of us have depended on poetry to reflect our experiences and voice our ideas in more formalized expression. Poetry fosters both aesthetic and efferent responses to our reading.¹ Through poetry, students can learn facts and at the same time learn about word appreciation and word choice. Poetry carries lyrical, arts-based, and culturally-based elements that engage readers and writers (teachers and students) at an aesthetic level and serve as an outlet for statements of personal concern.² With poetry's potential for making important contributions to learning, preservice and practicing teachers would do well to integrate this genre into the social studies classroom.

Specifically, poetry can be used for reflection in social studies and history classes and for consideration of community resources.³ Poetry in social studies classrooms can be used to develop themes of cultural diversity and to represent important historical events or people.⁴ Adolescents can read texts from the literary canon that feature the works of classic poets and span a wide range of eras. Lastly, poetry can be used to present information in a textual format different from the traditional textbook. Writing poetry can encourage students to develop more specific, descriptive, detailed word choices and to explore

different structures for expressing their creativity or content area learning. Reluctant writers may be willing to utilize short, structured poems such as haiku, cinquains, five senses poems, or acrostics, allowing teachers to differentiate reading and writing assignments.

The Challenge to Poetry Applications

As literacy teacher educators, a challenge we faced in our content area literacy courses was that preservice teachers frequently reported they perceived poetry to be unrelatable and inaccessible.⁵ Their perception

Alexander the Great Apology
By [REDACTED]

My army and I came riding in
to conquer all of your land
and some of you became slaves

You were once mighty
our main rival
in the Mediterranean

Forgive me
I needed you Persia
to make an empire
for I am Alexander the Great

that poetry was too boring to read, too complicated to understand, and too difficult to write, had remained with them throughout their K-12 education and into their college teacher preparation programs. If not addressed, these feelings would likely continue into their instructional planning, with poetry being left out of their classroom lessons. As noted by Sharon Kane and Audrey Rule, teachers often need to be supported in developing a comfort with writing and sharing their own poetry and with applying it to content area instruction to deepen students' learning.⁶ Mary Ross McLaren and Julie Arnold found developing poetry knowledge to be a "transforming pedagogy" that developed their perceptions and self-

awareness as soon-to-be educators.⁷ These researchers documented that exposure to and engagement with poetry changed the preservice teachers' perceptions of poetry. We, too, wanted to determine whether reading and writing poetry impacted our preservice teachers' interest and confidence in using poetry.

Additionally, students' development of poetry competencies is necessary to satisfy the learning standards that specify the details and craft/representation of school topics, including those with social studies content and interpretation⁸ and English Language Arts.⁹ One real-life application of poetry with regard to U.S. history is the critically acclaimed Broadway musical *Hamilton*, which fol-

lows the political and historical life of Alexander Hamilton using rap selections. As content area instructors, we believe that efficacious teachers can harness the power of poetry to develop students' reading skills while building their content knowledge and writing proficiency.

Building Reading Skills and Motivation. Research literature documents that pre-service teachers benefit from opportunities to read, write, and teach poetry as models for classroom use.¹⁰ Middle and high school students continue to expand their reading competencies, reading to learn as well as learning to read new, more complex forms of text.¹¹ These students are transitioning into more abstract thinking and are able to infer, hypothesize, and

Teachers' Uses of Poetry in Social Studies Topics

Writing to demonstrate understanding or inform others

- Bio-poems (Renowned African Americans) in Pierce-Thomas, 2009
- Circle poems (American Indians) in Galt, 1992
- Ekphrastic poems and riddle poems (Pictures and concepts from the civil rights movement) in Pierce-Thomas, 2009
- List poems, two-voice poems, and free verse (World War II) in Friese and Nixon, 2009
- Multimodal poems (Citizenship) in Pellegrino, Zenkov, and Calamito, 2013
- Poem strips (*Legend of St. Ann's Flood*) in Fry, 2009

Cassandra Pierce-Thomas, "Looking Through the Eyes of Injustice: Integrating Poetry and African-American History," *Multicultural Education* (2009): 2–6.

Margot Fortunato Galt, "The Story in History: Writing Your Way into the American Experience," *Teachers & Writers* 24, no. 1 (1992): 1–7.

Elizabeth E.G. Friese and Jenna Nixon, "Poetry and World War II: Creating Community Through Content Area Writing," *Voices from the Middle* 16, no. 3 (2009): 23–30.

Anthony M. Pellegrino, Kristien Zenkov, and Nicholas Calamito, "'Pay Attention and Take Some Notes': Middle School Youth, Multimodal Instruction, and Notions of Citizenship," *The Journal of Social Studies Research* 37 (2013): 221–238.

Sara Winstead Fry, "Exploring Social Studies through Multicultural Literature: *Legend of St. Ann's Flood*," *The Social Studies* (2009): 85–91.

Reading for Information

- Period poetry and protest songs (wars in history: War of 1812, World War I, Vietnam War) in Lopez, 2014
- Poetry carvings from the Angel Island Immigration Station (History of Angel Island) in Rodriguez, 2015
- Primary sources including poetry and songs, Middle Ages to present (Utopia) in Resor and Gandy, 2014
- Recommendations of books and poems (Geography) in Sekeres and Gregg, 2008
- Various poetry formats (African American History) in Meadows, 1999
- Various poetry formats (World War I) in *Social Education* Staff, 2014

Christopher Lopez, "They Should Have Sent a Poet: Deepening Students' Understanding of History Through the Use of Poetry," *Social Education* 78, no.1 (2014): 16–19.

Noreen Naseem Rodríguez, "Teaching About Angel Island Through Historical Empathy and Poetry," *Social Studies and The Young Learner* 27, no. 3 (2015): 22–25.

Cynthia Resor and S. Kay Gandy, "Dreaming of a Better Life: Utopia as a Focus for Thematic, Interdisciplinary Instruction," *The Clearing House* 87 (2014): 1–8.

Diane Carver Sekeres and Sr. Madeleine Gregg, "The Stealth Approach: Geography and Poetry," *Journal of Geography* 107 (2008): 3–11.

Doris M. Meadows, "African-American Poetry and History: Making Connections," *OAH Magazine of History* 13, no. 2 (1999): 36–41.

Social Education Staff, "Poems of the Great War: A Selection," *Social Education* 78, no. 3 (2014): 112–116.

envision multiple perspectives.¹² They also must become more critical readers who can discern factual from narrative elements, and poetry is a genre that can help students develop these important reading skills. For some students, the use of poetry can be a motivational element for learning and can increase attention.¹³ More specifically, in an attempt to provide wide reading in the social studies classroom and following an increase in interest and engagement from students when reading poems on these topics, Sylvia Vardell recommended texts and ideas for integrating the poetic genre into classroom reading in all areas of the social studies standards.¹⁴

Building social studies content knowledge and writing proficiency. Other

teachers have written about the creative ways they have integrated poetry into their instruction. Some used poetry as an alternative format for writing that enabled students to demonstrate understanding of their reading through the words of poetry. Other teachers used poetry as a text that conveys information to students. The sidebar on p. 388 highlights ways in which teachers have used poetry reading and writing in the social studies.

Preservice Teachers (Re) Connecting with Poetry

In order to build preservice teachers' interest and competencies, we integrated poetry reading and writing into our content area literacy courses and demonstrated the practical classroom applica-

tions of poetry activities in content areas. We explained that when teachers and students read poetry, they bring varied life experiences, levels of background knowledge, and purposes to their reading. These variables influence how each reader interprets, or *transacts*, with the text.¹⁵ Poetry with historical context, such as "Paul Revere's Ride"¹⁶ or "A Wreath for Emmett Till,"¹⁷ might be read for efferent response to the historical content, but it might also be read to prompt emotional responses from middle or high school readers and stimulate classroom discussions. At any one given time, a social studies teacher might want students to read a poem and feel its emotional impact, to gain knowledge from the content, or gain knowledge about

Various Forms of Poetry

haiku - a three-line poem written in a 5/7/5 syllable count.

cinquains - a five line poem.

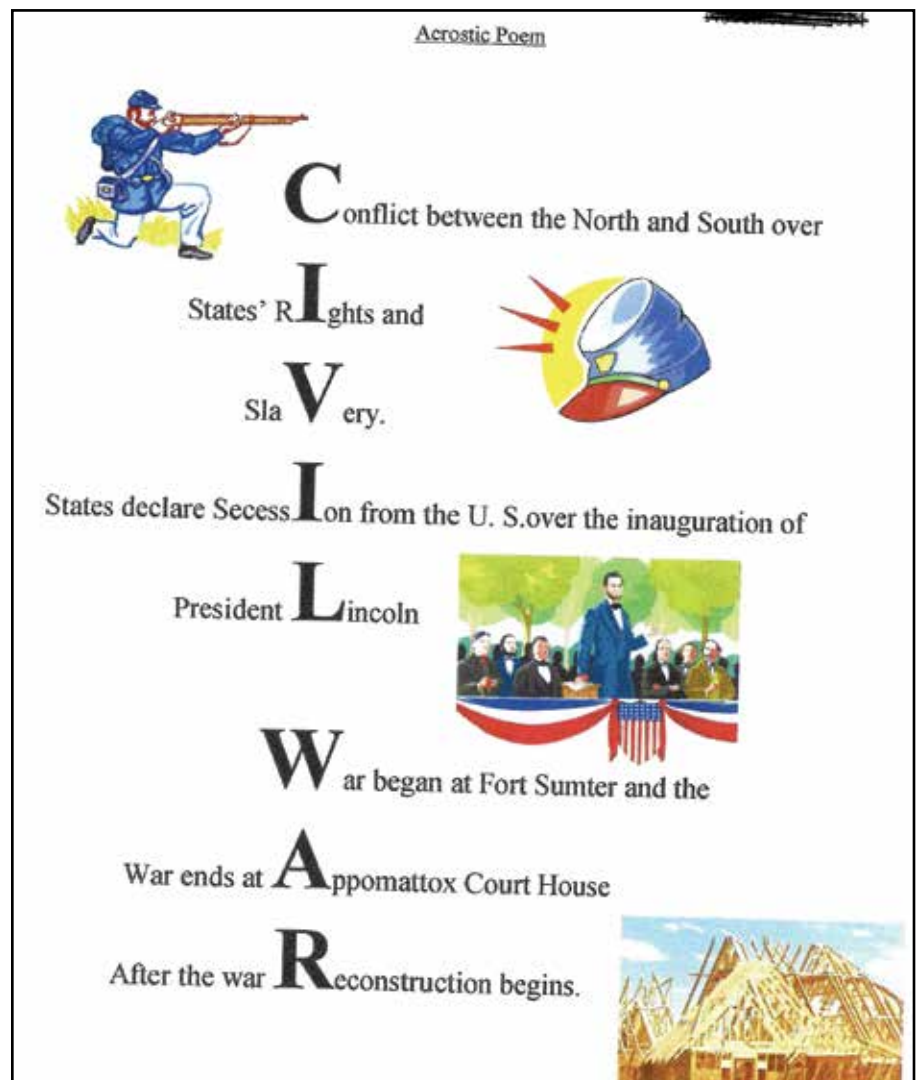
five senses poems - describes a topic through taste, touch, sight, smell, and hearing.

found poems - take existing texts and refashion, reorder, and present them as poems. The literary equivalent of a collage.

list poems - made of a list of items or events.

apology poems - the writer offers an apology to someone through the poem.

acrostic - words are spelled out through the first letter of each line.



the particular structure of the poem (e.g., use the poem as a mentor text for poetry writing). At-risk students may find poetry a form for self-representation,¹⁸ for democratic citizenship,¹⁹ and to share and present personal experiences.²⁰

Next, we introduced and practiced a variety of poetry formats including haiku, found poems, list poems, apology poems, and acrostics (See sidebar on p. 389). We asked our students to collect and re-read classic and non-traditional historical poetry, and then write and share their own compositions. Prior to and following these activities, we administered a short survey to see how their interests about poetry may have changed. The surveys indicated that they began

the instruction with limited exposure to reading poetry across content areas and little or no experience with writing poetry outside of their high school language arts courses.

Although it was not required, many preservice teachers proceeded to integrate poetry reading or writing into their field experience lessons. Some asked students to describe their day using haiku poems. The preservice teachers reported that students found this to be fun and that it helped review the details of one of the day's events. In a middle school social studies classroom, students wrote acrostic poems about Roman emperors and read a poem about Mowgli (feral children—in reference to Romulus and

Remus). In a Language Arts class, students read selected poems, discussed theme, and also read “A Taxing Poem” about King George III. The preservice teachers who assigned poetry writing in social studies also provided students with models they had written. A number of preservice teachers noted that they enjoyed writing the apology poems and appreciated that these could be humorous; they also commented that the acrostic and list poems could be used to determine their students’ understanding of vocabulary or course content. Both the survey ratings and preservice teachers’ inclusion of poetry in field experience lessons indicated a growing confidence with and willingness to integrate poetry into content area instruction. However, results indicated that preservice teachers continued to feel more confident reading poetry with their students than writing poetry with them.

In our classes, the preservice teachers’ original poems (some examples at left) were based on a wide variety of topics: (a) Found poems: one based on a flyer about a mental health renewal levy; another about the Bill of Rights; (b) List poems: one based on 1950s pop culture, another based on the *Kite Runner*; (c) Acrostic poems: on Imperial Rule; another on Vietnam; and (d) Apology poems: on Benedict Arnold; another related to the Boston Tea Party.

Teachers have shared in professional publications the creative ways they integrate poetry into instruction. Some used poetry to provide an alternative format for writing in which students can use information from their reading and demonstrate understanding through poems. Other teachers used poetry as a text that conveys information to students. To become more comfortable with reading and writing poetry in social studies classrooms, middle and high school teachers can first locate poems that align with their instructional standards or themes and challenge students to read and comprehend the poems as a complex text. Next, teachers and students can use poetry formats (e.g., haiku, found

Acrostic, Found, and Haiku Poetry for Social Studies

In the ancient world, Empires dominated,
Men ruled over their subjects.
Powerful was the dictator, but
Even Caesar needed help to rule.
Rome was his empire, stretching over a huge part of Europe.
In spite of being part of the First Triumvirate
All of the power eventually went to Caesar who
Labeled himself the dictator.
Romans were split on their feelings toward him.
Under a feeling of safety, his friends stabbed him
Left him to die.
Et tu, Brute?

Foundations of our
Republic depend on
Equality to
Electrify enthusiasm for a
Democracy that provides
Opportunities to
Maintain and motivate the population.

Going out to explore new people and places
Earth is home to many animals, resources, plants,
Open roads, water and spaces.
Grab a map and research all the beauty in store
Rivers, lakes, mountains, valleys
Are you ready to see all of this and more?
Pollution, global warming, natural resources depleting.
Humans affect our Earth everyday,
You are one of them, are you going to leave it a better place?

Found poem
 (about a flyer for a Mental Health Renewal Levy)
 Vote!
NO New Taxes!
 Keep a good thing going!
 Renewal Levy!
 Sustain the valuable safety net!

Haiku about Vietnam
 Too many are lost.
 Haiyan - the deadliest storm.
 Pray for Vietnam.

List Poem

My Social Studies Classroom

Maps on the walls

Textbook beneath my desk

My friends to the left and right of my desk

Partner work

Simulations

My teacher making me laugh

Desks in rows

SMARTboard with fun games

My work on the achievement wall.

poetry, lists/acrostics, apology poems) or poetry mentor texts to write poems that develop vocabulary knowledge or present information about a topic. The ultimate goal, then, is that throughout the process of being poetry readers and writers, teachers and students can gain a new appreciation of the aesthetic elements of poetry as well as its creative applications.

Teachers' sense of efficacy for a task can impact their instructional decision-making causing them to avoid content or strategies with which they are not confident.²¹ Therefore, it is important that teacher educators and professional development providers offer the types of instruction, resources, and opportunities for teachers that enable them to develop the competence necessary for integrating poetry into their classroom instruction. 🌍

Notes

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Resources for Poetry Formats

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