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Bringing Imagination into the Community through a Poetry-Writing Honors Course

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Through my experience I. . .witnessed students' self-esteem and confidence improve, as students were proud and eager to share their work with others. . . .I also noticed that students who seemed to have emotional or behavioral problems seemed to shine in poetry writing, which in effect caused them to feel better about themselves and strive to do better in school.

—Rima Kakhah, 4th grade teacher

Poetry is such an incredible form of expression. When reading the poems [the children wrote], one can feel what fun the writer had in creating the poem.

—Martha Pinales, parent of 4th grader

The students that I felt probably wouldn't want to write or didn't really care for writing actually did come up with some wonderful thoughts. . . . I was able to see another perspective on their personalities.

—Melba Smith, 2nd grade teacher

I think through the experience, I became convinced that elementary school is the best time to present "real poetry" to children, as any attempt to present it in junior high or high school will always be met with a self-consciousness and reluctance toward poetry that is not present in elementary school children.

—Silvana Naguib, honors student

Writing poetry applies to all levels of intelligence and engages multiple intelligences. It creates space where everyone can learn. Poetry allows all to excel in the writing process, as well as the creative process, without restrictions. Most important, poetry gives freedom to children. A tool to take with them their entire lives.

—Joey Roberts, honors student

For the past few years, I have taught an honors course here at Southwest Texas State University called "Teaching Poetry to Children" that trains ten honors students to teach poetry writing workshops at Crockett Elementary School in San Marcos, Texas twice a week for eight weeks. After a few weeks of immersion in Kenneth Koch's books *Rose, Where Did You Get that Red? Teaching Great Poetry to Children* and *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Young Children to Write Poetry* and

equipped with favorite poems from several different cultural traditions (American, British, Spanish, Chinese, and African among them), our ten students enter the public domain of a nearby elementary school ready and eager to bring the creative art of poetry to young people who might otherwise never get such exposure. The stint ends with a Young People's Poetry Reading (organized by our students) for the whole community at the San Marcos Public Library in celebration of *National Poetry Month*. Designed specifically for our students, this course fulfills two important honors program needs: it meets the desire many of our students have to delve into the creative arts of reading and writing poetry, and it provides them with a way (through these same arts) to render a meaningful service to the wider community.

Through such a class, honors students engage in the creative arts, in this case poetry, on a very personal level. In teaching a class full of first, second, third, or fourth graders, using poetry from the literary cannon as a springboard to create individual interpretations of artistic intent, the honors students get to feel the power of good teaching, the value of patient waiting through silence as their students grapple with the "poetry idea" behind the poem presented to the class, and the enormous pleasure that comes from witnessing the creation of a poem and the delight from hearing it read.

Honors students in such a community-based creative-arts class come away with very valuable knowledge. They come to understand the process of guiding young people to appreciate poetry, and they learn to devise their own responses to the ideas in poems and to insert like ideas into their own poetry. The honors students begin to see the variety of sensibilities that are included in an elementary classroom—especially as the grade school children react to poetry by designing and producing their own works of art. In addition, honors students absorb the reaction of grade school teachers and class members to an individual grade school student's art. Most importantly, though, our students get to help create a common classroom appreciation for the role the arts can play in shaping an individual imaginative response.

The real key to success in designing a creative-arts course is to have a clear method for teaching poetry to honors students that they can then use in the elementary school classroom. Kenneth Koch's books explore how to teach children to read and write poetry, a double exploration he treats as a single subject brought together by means of what he calls "poetry ideas," which may be found in abundance in the poems he has collected in *Rose, Where Did You Get that Red? Teaching Great Poetry to Children* (Harper and Row, New York, 1970) and in exercises he has designed in *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Young Children to Write Poetry* (Vintage Books, New York, 1990). Honors students study Koch's works before watching as I demonstrate a poetry lesson suitable for a third-grade classroom. They then write their own curriculum based on Koch's ideas and are given an opportunity to observe the classrooms they are assigned before their own teaching begins. Once in the classroom, each honors student presents to the first, second, third, or fourth graders the "poetry idea" from his or her own curricular design. This involves reading a sample poem, such as William Blake's "The Tyger," and then, after discussing what is interesting in the poem, getting the students in the classroom to write, as Blake did, a poem asking a favorite animal questions. Each student's list of questions becomes

a poem—and at this point, there is no worrying over rhyming or even spelling. Once everyone in the room understands that good poems are based on common experience—such as wondering about mysterious animals—and not on some special inaccessible gift, writing begins in earnest. The results are always surprising to everyone present—the honors student, the classroom student writing the poem, and the classroom teacher. A similar approach could be taken using other art media: one could present classical ideas in paintings, for example, to which students would respond with their own visual arts creations. The same process could work with dance, music, photography, theater, or any other creative art.

Another key to the successful translation of a creative-arts honors course into the community is having the support of partners. Our university honors program provides the ideas, methods, and poets for teaching the workshops at Crockett Elementary School. The university student center has provided transportation for the honors students to travel from the university to the elementary school. The local school district is open to scheduling creative-arts enrichment for children, as is the staff of the local public library. After seeing the track record of our efforts at Crockett, our school district gave financial support to one of our honors thesis students for the publication of a book of children's poetry and artwork. The public library prints the programs and provides space and sound equipment for the Young People's Poetry Readings held in April in celebration of *National Poetry Month.* In addition to local support, a Portz Fund Grant provided some funds for travel to the NCHC in Washington, D.C. to present a session (entitled "An Idea Spilling Over: Poetry in the Schools, Community, and the University") on the experience of teaching a creative-arts honors class. Such a collaboration among the university, the public schools, and the city in support of a creative-arts honors class brings honors arts outside of the university classroom and into the community. The Portz Fund Grant and the *National Poetry Month* celebration connect the local creative arts efforts initiated by our class with national efforts to support and celebrate the arts.

What is the value in having a creative-arts course such as this specifically for honors students? The interdisciplinary focus of this course requires honors students to form their own understanding of the poetry they will present to a classroom of elementary students. This course requires honors students to create a writing assignment that employs elements of the poetry they plan to present in a way that relates to the classroom students' own experiences, and it requires them to believe, enthusiastically, that they can convince even the most reluctant, shy, and weary elementary school children (along with their teachers) that each student in the classroom CAN write a poem.

Honors students in this type of poetry course must be prepared to incorporate into their teaching at least rudimentary knowledge of music, the visual arts, and concepts ordinarily associated with science or mathematics—in short, anything that might relate to the poem they are presenting. Many poems are explorations of nature, for example, and the strongest interpretations of such poems often need to include a physical understanding of the natural world. In addition, honors students must learn at least a little something about the art and technical skill of publishing so that they can help their students create a handsome gift volume of student poems for each

student and teacher. The final classroom project has honors students hosting readings from these volumes of poems in both the classroom and the public library before an audience of elementary school students, teachers, and families, which requires our students to understand the need for drama in a presentation and to do some meaningful coaching toward that end. The last assignment the honors student completes is a journal of experiences teaching poetry and a written paper reflecting on the education he or she has gained.

Conclusion

This creative arts course works for honors students for several reasons. Many university students have a natural desire to read and write poetry. They see poetry as an important component in their lives or at least wish that it were. Often they see poetry as an entity "out there" and wish to have a way to capture it and bring it "down to earth." They have a sense that to read, write, and know poetry will benefit their lives. And they yearn to experience the realm of imagination and concrete experience manifested in the world of poetry. Music, theatre, dance, and the visual arts surely capture honors students' imagination in similar ways.

When this desire to read and write poetry is taken into the community to children in the local schools and libraries, the honors students' experience becomes much larger than an individual experience of reading and writing poetry alone. In bringing the arts into the community through poetry, an honors course can open the door to the world of imagination where elementary school children acknowledge their own feelings and experiences by writing their own poems. One honors student in my class remarked that children have their own style of poetics; the significance of this remark should not be ignored. In addition, the elementary school teachers see the children in their classrooms in a new light as each of their students works individually to shape a poem that reveals his or her own insights. Bringing poetry into the community makes it clear how important it is for all individuals, whatever their age or level of education, to write about their feelings and experiences. Bringing poetry into the community makes writing poetry something real and vibrant in the lives of children, teachers, and honors students alike.

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