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Poetry across the Curriculum: New Methods of Writing Intensive Pedagogy for U.S. Community College and Undergraduate Education: A Book Review

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Abstract

This book review presents the basic premise of the book, which is use of poetry to teach undergraduate courses. The author of the review shares her own experiences with using poetry to teach college courses and highlights the beginning chapters. The editors of the book, Frank Jacobs, Shannon Kincaid and Amy. E. Traver, and other authors share their experiences from a workshop on the use of poetry in college. Empirical and anecdotal examples do well to underscore the need for more arts-based education and particularly poetry in teaching college courses.

Keywords

Poetry, Poetic Inquiry, Poetry and College Courses, Creative Pedagogy

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Poetry across the Curriculum: New Methods of Writing Intensive Pedagogy for U.S. Community College and Undergraduate Education: A Book Review

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This book review presents the basic premise of the book, which is use of poetry to teach undergraduate courses. The author of the review shares her own experiences with using poetry to teach college courses and highlights the beginning chapters. The editors of the book, Frank Jacobs, Shannon Kincaid and Amy. E. Traver, and other authors share their experiences from a workshop on the use of poetry in college. Empirical and anecdotal examples do well to underscore the need for more arts-based education and particularly poetry in teaching college courses. Keywords: Poetry, Poetic Inquiry, Poetry and College Courses, Creative Pedagogy

“Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.” – Francis Bacon, 1625

This is a review of the book *Poetry across the Curriculum* (Jacob, Kincaid & Traver, 2018) by Frank Jacob, Shannon Kincaid and Amy E. Traver (Editors). The book review endeavors to enable the readers and potential users of this book to taste the book before chewing and digesting it. I am a college teacher who dared to use poetry in my special education classes, as a pedagogical tool to teach something, other than poetry. It was apparent that I was quite effective in my very first attempt at this in higher education a decade ago, when I worked as an instructor during my doctoral work. I was irritated with all the hype about autism which resulted in a poem (Cousik, 2008). Poetry can emerge from inspiration, frustration, angst or a myriad of other emotions and experiences. We are well-aware of this. I wanted to do more with my poem and inspired by a doctoral level seminar course on arts-based research, I dared to use this poem to teach a chapter on autism in a special education course. I was hoping to grab the attention of my students, who seemed bored with the routine slide-driven lectures and small group discussions. This was a decade ago. Hardly anyone had heard about use of poetry as a pedagogical tool in an education methods course, notwithstanding those rare qualitative researchers who eschewed numbers and art/ified their data. The latter's work I found with difficulty in a few scholarly, peer reviewed journals. Use of poetry seemed fit for certain fields, like nursing (for example, Galvin, & Todres, 2011). Caregivers and patients found freedom and vented their feelings through eloquent poetry (Furman, 2004; 2006; Öhlen, 2003; Stevenson, 2005). Autoethnographers sometimes broke into poetry (Bickel, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2012; Speedy, 2016; Spry, 2001). A handful of great books and articles I found, talked about arts-based research and arts informed research including poetic inquiry (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Cole & Knowles, 2008; Knowles & Cole, 2008; McCulliss, 2013; Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009; Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis, & Grauer, 2006; Sparkes & Douglas, 2007). To my disappointment, I did not find anything that provided guidance on how to use poetry to teach college courses other than those that focused on literature. Teaching

through rhymes and rhythm and using other musical elements seemed to be seemith (Sanskrit word meaning “limited to”) to kindergarten.

That is why I was delighted when I got an email alert from Brill (previously Sense Publishers) about a book that was a compilation of college teachers’ accounts of how to use poetry to teach a disparate range of courses—from sociology to STEM to stoicism, apart from literature. Finally, folks that I could identify with and wax poetic eloquent, who “get” what I do. When you are on the margins, believe me it is lonely and scary and exiting at the same time. The editors of the book make a case for poetry as a teaching tool right at the beginning. They situate use of poetry within the larger problem of how education has become a means to pecuniary ends rather than for “social means” (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. viii). Poetry, they state, serves as a valuable platform where several college topics can interact, coalesce and evolve, creating new understandings in students. They rue the fall of poetry along with other arts in the field of higher education and make a case for its comeback.

The book consists of 6 parts-arts, biology, English, history, philosophy and sociology. There are totally eleven chapters and the author of each chapter explains how they attempted to use poetry to involve students more actively in the subject taught. Anecdotal and empirical examples are provided that indicate the positive effect of use of poetry, measured by student satisfaction, grades and student reflection. In most chapters, the authors’ arguments are supported by previously published research.

This is a great beginning on the topic and such books are much needed if we want creative arts in education and social sciences to join spaces in the center with the sciences. The first chapter captures the reader’s attention right away with its excellent structure and illustrations. The author (Rovner, 2018) clearly explains what object poetry is, its historical context and usage, steps in creating object poetry, examples of modern usage of object poetry and finally provides empirical evidence of use of object poetry in the author’s class. The highlight of the narrative is the “exhibition” of object poetry by students. In Chapter 2, Cimino (Cimino, 2018) walks the readers through the characteristics of arts integrated learning and use of poetry within this realm. The rest of the nine chapters serve to support the arguments that these two chapters posit. Although the title suggests that it may be suitable for beginning writers such as undergraduate students, the book or chapters can be used in any college class as a supplementary text and teachers can explore use of poetry—via students reading famous/infamous poems, analyzing, creating their own or engaging in critical thinking. It can also be used as a complimentary text in arts-based research methods courses thereby helping aspiring researchers understand applications of poetic inquiry outside the realm of research, in the real-world college classroom. Finally, I recommend this book for doctoral students engaging in poetic inquiry or those like me that like to intersperse other forms of qualitative research with poetic inquiry.

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