

Nobody Knows the Stories of Others: High School English Language Learners Find Their Poetic Voices by Responding to Works of Art

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This essay tells the story of a collaboration between an English education professor in a large urban university and a high school English teacher working in a school whose population consists almost entirely of new immigrants. The English education professor serves as a visiting teaching artist, introducing the students to studies of works of art, and collaborates with their teacher on developing the students' responses to these works and collecting the students' own poetry and collages into an anthology. The experience of discussing works of art and writing poetry had a significant impact on the students' academic performance in other areas, especially in regard to their sense of efficacy and their self-images as students. Most striking was the fact that there were no extrinsic incentives for participation in creating the anthology. Rather than working for grades, promotion, or credit toward graduation, the students were intrinsically motivated to participate in writing these poems, spending considerable amounts of time on many rounds of revisions because the work was valuable to them personally. The students' poems are breathtakingly beautiful and honest in their telling of the stories of their homes prior to coming to the United States and their adjustment to their new lives as Americans and New Yorkers.

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My feet flew away from my homeland

my head left in the air

floating in the middle of nowhere

Far away, a big shiny dream was waiting for me with open arms.

Going with a broken heart and a piece of it crying.

The above quote is an excerpt from a poem written by Johan, a 12th-grade student in The Bronx, New York who had recently emigrated from the Dominican Republic. In it he captures the emotional impact of a young person leaving the only home he has ever known for a “far away, big shiny dream.” Johan was a student at Kingsbridge International High School, one of New York City’s small schools, which serves a student population consisting almost entirely of children who have emigrated from other countries. During the 2014–2015 school year I collaborated with Molly Sherman, an English teacher at Kingsbridge International, to produce an anthology of poems written by the students in response to our study of several works of art. This brief excerpt of Johan’s poem captures the deep ambivalence of an immigrant’s experience—heartbroken and yet optimistic, leaving behind the familiar and beloved for the promise of opportunity. The young people who enter our school systems must work toward meeting proficiency standards in reading, writing, and mathematics while learning to navigate a strange new world, suddenly frustrated in their ability to communicate fluently.

English language learners (ELLs) are a significant and growing demographic in the United States. According to the Institute for Education Studies, as of 2013, the most recent year for which data are available, 9.2% of all of the students in U.S. schools were ELLs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). In raw numbers, that translates to roughly 4.4 million students. In New York City, 14.45% of students are ELLs, with a remarkable 47.5% of those born in countries other than the United States. In total, 41% of all New York City students speak a language other than English at home (Office of English Language Learners, 2013).

In nearly every school in New York City there are students of varying ages who have recently arrived from some other country. Many of them are struggling to learn English while trying to keep

up with their studies in other subjects. They are from all over the world—often from terrible circumstances. As Kenyan born Somali poet Warsan Shire writes in her heart-stopping poem called “Home” (2015):

No one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well.

Due to the chaotic and precarious circumstances that force some people to leave their homes, students may arrive in U.S. schools having had little formal schooling prior to migrating here. Many English teachers struggle, too, to find ways of helping these students to succeed. While teacher education programs do what they can to equip content-area teachers to understand the needs of ELLs, it is usually left to teachers of English as a second language (ESL) to address these issues. As a result, there is little consistent preparation for teachers without training in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) to ensure that the ELLs in their classes are able to keep up. There is an urgent need for attention to the plight of ELLs—not just because they are at risk of falling behind academically, but also because they are at risk of losing themselves. During our project Ms. Sherman explained that students described the experience of being unable to be understood as “feeling as if they no longer existed.”

Imagine feeling as if you no longer existed. Why even try to learn algebra, chemistry, or history? Why read novels or write essays when you feel, as a student named Brandon writes, like:

a broken toy
and the last thing a factory needs
is another broken toy.

I am a professor of English education, helping to prepare graduate students at Lehman College, the campus of the City University of New York located in The Bronx to become middle

and high school English teachers. In order to help our teacher candidates be better prepared to meet these students' needs, I wanted to learn from English language arts teachers who were finding ways to truly engage their ELL students as they rose to the challenges of learning to navigate the various landscapes of this strange and cacophonous city.

In the spring of 2014 I met Molly Sherman at the New York City Writing Project's Teacher to Teacher Conference. This annual event brings together teachers from all over the city to share successful teaching practices. The work she presented along with her colleague Priscilla Thomas involved student poetry written in response to historical documents they were reading in their social studies class. The students' ownership and investment in the project and their authentic insights into the historical events they were reading about were striking. Their poems were moving and sophisticated. This suggested great possibilities for the kind of writing the students might be able to produce in a setting that would allow them time to explore literature—not just for surface comprehension, but for those points of personal connection with a text that are the hallmark of successful lifelong reading.

In order to learn about the work she was doing so that I could share it with my own graduate English education students, I invited Molly to participate in a project by the Professional Staff Council of the City University of New York (PSC-CUNY) to establish writing centers for ELLs at several local high schools. That is what led to our collaboration, which is currently in its second year. In addition to providing a small amount of funding for books and other classroom materials, I taught workshops introducing her students to works of art, fostering the same kinds of rich discussions and thoughtful writing she had led the students to produce in response to nonfiction texts. We also used funding from the grant to produce an anthology of the students' poems and artwork. The anthology, titled *Nobody Knows the Stories of Others*, takes its name from the title of a poem written by a student named Loraines, in which she gives an account of the many challenges her family faced in trying to establish a foothold in their new country. She describes a harrowing journey, her family staying temporarily in a homeless shelter, but coming through the crisis:

In that moment we saw the light at the end of the tunnel
we were at peace . . .
I felt hopeful.

The approach we used in our collaboration is known as *aesthetic education*, a practice that engages students in learning about works of art through hands-on inquiry, questioning, writing, and art making. In the words of the philosopher Maxine Greene (2001), it requires that “learners must break with the taken-for-granted . . . and look through the lenses of various ways of knowing, seeing and feeling in a conscious endeavor to impose different orders upon experience” (p. 5).

In keeping with the year-long inquiry theme of exploring what it means to be a hyphenated American, we began by looking at Frida Kahlo’s painting entitled *Self-Portrait on the Border Between Mexico and the United States* (1932; see <http://www.fridakahlo.org/self-portrait-along-the-boarder-line.jsp>) and discussed how Kahlo used symbols and imagery to convey her feelings about her relationship to the two countries. This discussion informed the poems the students wrote to express their own experiences with the ways in which immigration complicates identity.

Next we studied George Ella Lyon’s poem “Where I’m From” (1999), in which she explores her own rural Southern upbringing and offers it to readers as a way of considering the ways in which our histories shape us. This poem has been used as a mentor text in countless classrooms. It creates for students, as Linda Christensen says, “space for their lives to become part of the curriculum” (2003, p. 15). The poems students wrote in response to “Where I’m From” (the brief excerpts included in this essay are examples of these) reflect the complex realities of adapting to life in a new country. This poem is used so often as a mentor text in classrooms because of its seemingly magical ability to coax poems out of students who may not otherwise be poetically inclined. In her poem, Lyon provides a litany of memories including names and places, sights and smells, and familiar phrases that evoke an image of a very specific place

and time. When we read the poem together in class, the students listened carefully and wrote questions in the margins of their copies. When the poet mentions a forsythia bush in her poem, several students immediately wanted to know what that looked like. It was not enough for the students to be told that it was a yellow flowering bush. Several immediately turned to the Internet to see the images themselves. Taking these matters into their own hands was for these students a self-taught moment that helped them to enrich the linguistic imagery in their own work. This became a point of entry allowing Ms. Sherman to push them in the direction of clarity and specificity, qualities that can make a poem memorable. In one case, it took her five minutes of focused questioning to bring a student named Akram from the line “I am from the smell of donuts and oatmeal” to this:

I am from Togo born after Communism
the sound of donuts frying in the morning
and oatmeal being stirred over the fire and under the stars
in the extra large *suferia*.
Mamas and daughters laughing and gossiping as they work.

With the right questions (What does that smell like? Can you describe the sounds? Where are you? What else can you see?) Akram was able to move from making a generic statement to evoking an entire sensory world. We also see in Akram’s use of the word *suferia* an example of translanguaging, defined by Garcia and Wei (2014) as

an approach to the use of language, bilingualism and the education of bilinguals that considers the language practices of bilinguals not as two autonomous language systems as has traditionally been the case, but as one linguistic repertoire with features that have been societally constructed as belonging to two separate languages. (p. 5)

The notion of a linguistic repertoire that does not demand that students replace one language with another allows for a richness and individuality that can only enhance students’ creative and

expressive writing. By using the precise word *suferia* rather than a pale and imprecise translation such as “large cooking pot,” we as readers can have a small taste of Akram’s home and feel the language in our mouths as we speak it aloud.

One of the principles that Ms. Sherman used to guide the students in their writing was Rita Dove’s (n.d.) notion that “Poetry is language at its most distilled and most powerful.” As a result of their deep engagement with this work, students wrote in their reflections that they now no longer see poetry simply as something to read for school but not really connect with. They now see it as a form of universal expression that is both personal and powerful. In addition to the Kahlo painting and Lyon’s poem, they studied Jacob Lawrence’s *Migration Series* (see <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1549>), Romare Bearden’s *Black Odyssey* (see <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/wallach/exhibitions/Romare-Bearden.html>), Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), and the song “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. All of these works dealing in different ways with the notion of displacement became mentor texts that informed the students’ poetry.

In keeping with the current passion for data and accountability, one might be tempted to ask whether all this time spent on poetry and art really had any value in terms of academic outcomes. These are teenagers with lives, responsibilities, and jobs outside of school, and yet many came to school early and stayed late to revise their poems. They did this not for grades or credit toward graduation, but simply because it was important to them.

The process of revision led students who were often fearful of writing to engage and become skilled in the writing process. The quality of peer feedback for the final poem was often inspiring; they listened deeply and thoughtfully to one another and gave each other encouragement. This sustained writing experience spoke to issues of fear, shame, and low-level skills that can so often cause students to fall behind and become disengaged from school. Addressing these issues through writing that is personally meaningful affords them a sense of accomplishment and creates building blocks for a foundation of process in all academic areas.

Not only did they have the experience of writing and revising powerful poems, the improvement in their prose writing was also striking. One student, upon receiving positive feedback on her poem from peers, was in tears as she said, “Before this I never thought I was good at anything.” As teachers we appreciate how one successful experience can make a tremendous difference in a student’s overall sense of self-efficacy.

The students in this class come from such diverse places as the Dominican Republic, Bangladesh, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Niger, and Albania, to name but a few of their countries of origin. They are teenagers with all of the hopes, dreams, worries, and challenges of any other teenagers, but their stories include experiences of displacement and of learning to survive in a new place with strange language, customs, and even weather. The poems they wrote are honest accounts of being separated from loved ones. In many cases the countries they come from are torn apart by war and ravaged by poverty, but they are also places of loving families and proud traditions. What sets the poems apart is the astonishing richness of the language. These students drew upon their native language and vivid recollections, framed within the context of the art they were studying in school. With these poems we can gain a glimpse into the complexity of the experiences of a group of young people from all over the world, thrown together with all of their vastly different experiences and backgrounds.

Particularly for young people who are new to this country, finding their way in U.S. culture, and struggling to make the English language their own, writing poetry can be an empowering experience. That experience becomes even more powerful when others read their words, allowing these young newcomers to be seen and heard once more.

THE AUTHOR

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