

Insight

Implication(s) for Teaching Poetry

Find the right mindset. The moment Penny asked Kelly to write a poem, his immediate thought was, *I'm not a poet!* He experienced an instant surge of resistance. His fear was reinforced when he began writing and nothing "poetic" flowed. Kelly is an experienced writer, yet when asked to write a poem, he felt the same level of anxiety he did when Mr. Wheeler asked him to write one in his eleventh-grade English class. Panic.

Teachers can lower student anxiety by sharing not just their anxiety but their strategies to move past it. When Kelly felt paralysis creeping in, he took action: he looked backward in his notebook for ideas, he turned to writing prose as a way of gaining momentum, he abandoned several subjects he found he didn't want to write poems about, and he walked away until he felt like returning. We should teach all of these moves—and more—to students.

Live with uncertainty. The road to Kelly's best draft took many detours. He came to understand that he wasn't ready until he was ready, and it was important to not be overwhelmed by a lack of progress. Initially, he didn't want to take on a dark subject, but then the next day he found himself in a different frame of mind. It's interesting to note that the idea for his poem came when Kelly wasn't pressing to find an idea.

This experience taught Kelly that he hadn't done enough work with students on how to search for inspiration and what to do when that inspiration doesn't come. Ideas arrive on their own timetable. Uncertainty is normal. Poets learn to accept this as natural. It also reminds us that we can't expect all of our students to immediately find topics that will sustain them through several drafts.

Share with others. It took courage to share a draft. Kelly found it very difficult to ask for targeted response when he thought the entire poem was terrible. But feedback proved to be valuable at various stages of the process—it helped Kelly to get started and it helped him to revise. As part of that process, Kelly had to decide which responses might help him to improve the poem and which responses to disregard.

Teachers should recognize and celebrate the courage it takes to share writing with others. They should model how to ask for specific, targeted responses. Writers need encouragement, not criticism, and we need to show students how to respond to drafts in ways that help writers move forward. Once students receive feedback, teachers must model how to turn this response into meaningful revision. This revision has a more powerful effect on students when it is done in real time in class.

Find joy in the surprises. Kelly had completed many drafts before he made one key revision that dramatically improved his poem—he changed the student's weather forecast to a stormy day. (In his early drafts, Wallace reported that the weather was "around 70 degrees, a little bit of a breeze, not a cloud in the sky." Kelly changed it to "Lots of dark clouds, / Looks like rain is coming.") This single move shifted the tone to a more accurate representation of Kelly's intent: he wanted readers to understand this moment was stormy for him, even decades later.

That one revision move brought Kelly joy and energized him to spend more time tinkering with his poem. This breakthrough came as a surprise, as Kelly was already convinced that his poem was the best he could do. He was wrong. His decision to tinker with it one more time paid a big dividend. There are unexpected rewards awaiting writers who develop the tenacity to stick with their writing. We can't tell students this. We must lead them to experience this on their own. Teachers are most powerful as models of process, not product, and when we discover joyful surprises, we make them visible.

Free the writer. Kelly was grateful that he was not being held to specific elements found in a poetry rubric. It moved him from following a task to creating something for himself. There were moments, especially early in the process when he was having trouble establishing momentum, where the talk of grades would have had a paralyzing effect. He wasn't looking over his shoulder at the criteria; he had room to fail, to breathe, to experiment.

Students will be more prolific as poets without evaluation invading their thinking. When we tell a student that the finished poem must include two similes, a metaphor, and three other poetry elements, we not only box in the writer but strip them of the experience of making decisions. *Writing to a rubric is the antithesis of creating poetry.* (We say more about evaluation later in this chapter.)

Consider next steps. Kelly needed to decide if his poem was good enough or whether he wanted to work on it some more. As of this writing, he is considering eliciting responses from others. Even though Kelly did not follow his earlier "On Deck" and "Bruises" poem ideas, they are sitting in his notebook. He is considering returning to one—or both—of them.

We must give writers space to make decisions about their drafts, including whether to abandon them and start over. Teachers need to realize that the pacing will be different for each student, that poetry is not something that the entire class can write in lockstep fashion. A hard deadline for all poetry writers is problematic. (Which is true for all writing as well.)

OR 3–1 What Kelly Learned About Teaching While Writing a Poem