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Small Token – A Pantoum for Pandemic-Era Educators*

By: Emily Leute

Gratitude will never be enough
Sincere appreciation is a start
Knowing that this year is beyond tough
We see you doing far more than your part

Sincere appreciation is a start
But you deserve more than our empty words
We see you doing far more than your part
Please know that your concerns are being heard

Still, you deserve more than our empty words,
Our hero worship, or rallying cries
So know that your concerns are being heard
And struggles seen with empathetic eyes

Though our hero worship and rallying cries
May come across as trivial or fluff
We see your struggles with empathetic eyes
And know that gratitude is not enough.

** This poem is written as an acknowledgement of all that educators have had to deal with since the start of the pandemic, an apology for not being able to do more to support you, and a show of solidarity.*

The Power of Poetry

In a time when the arts are often sidelined to make room in the school day for so-called “core” content, is there a place for poetry? With compounding pressures to boost test scores, improve foundational literacy skills, and increase exposure to informational text in the ELA classroom, should educators even bother with poetry? Despite these pressures (and also because of them), my answer is a resounding YES.

As ELA teachers, we are well aware of the benefits of poetry as a means of self-expression and a creative outlet for students. Still, we sometimes struggle to justify its place in the curriculum. What if I told you that poetry can offer students all that and more? In [Why Teaching Poetry in School is So Important](#) from Career Teachers, the authors describe the many benefits of poetry and how it connects to students’ lives

today. “In an age of tweets and hashtags, the brevity of a poem should in fact be the perfect art form for students today. Poetry has over recent history, been about self-expression, resistance and structural creativity. It reflects how kids engage with social media and technology. Poetry has the potential both in the classroom, and out of the classroom, to teach more than a basic understanding of iambic pentameter, rhyming couplets and haikus” ([Career Teachers, 2018](#)). And that’s not all it can do.

Poetry has social-emotional benefits for students. In [Five Reasons Why We Need Poetry in Schools](#), Elena Aguilar explains that poetry can build resilience by helping us view an experience in a new way ([Aguilar, 2013](#)). In a Washington Post article called [Why Kids Need Poetry in Their Lives, and How to Spark Their Interest in It](#), Jason Basa Nemec discusses the importance of the expressive arts to a child’s social-emotional development. Reading with children can help adults create a secure attachment with them, and poetry can make this more fun ([Nemec, 2021](#)). There are other benefits of poetry to mental health, including providing a safe way to express emotions ([Simmons, 2014](#)). “Whether it be through spoken word, or written, it allows both students and adults to express emotions in a controlled way. It can also help young people truly find their voice” ([Career Teachers, 2018](#)). These skills and outlets are more important now than ever.

Nemec also describes poetry as play. “Poetry is music. It’s about playing with language and sound. And kids love to play” ([Nemec, 2021](#)). He goes on to note that kids seem to lose interest in poetry as they get older, perhaps because of an unfavorable experience they had with it in school (they thought it was boring, they didn’t understand it, or it intimidated them, etc.) ([Nemec, 2021](#)). It is our job as ELA teachers to keep the play in poetry. For this reason, Aguilar cautions against overanalyzing poetry; instead, “Find the poems that wake you up, that make you feel as if you’ve submerged yourself in a mineral hot spring or an ice bath; find the poems that make you feel (almost) irrational joy or sadness or delight” ([Aguilar, 2013](#)). To keep the play in poetry, she recommends the poems that “make you want to roll around in them or paint their colors all over your bedroom ceiling. Those are the poems you want to play with -- forget the ones that don’t make sense. Find those poems that communicate with the deepest parts of your being and welcome them in” ([Aguilar, 2013](#)).

Poetry can also assist in building community. Because poetry invites students to share their stories in ways that are less direct and therefore less painful, it can help us get to know our students ([Aguilar, 2013](#)). Reading original poetry in front of the class can also build trust and develop empathy in the audience ([Simmons, 2014](#)). Poetry invites us to understand what someone else is thinking or feeling ([Career Teachers, 2018](#)). Since poetry can communicate as well as shape identity, it is important to have cultural representation in the poems we choose ([Nemec, 2021](#)). Poetry can provide us with a means to understand and appreciate differences in people and perspectives ([Career Teachers, 2018](#)). Poet Jeanette Winterson has this to say about poetry:

When people say that poetry is a luxury, or an option, or for the educated middle classes, or that it shouldn't be read in school because it is irrelevant, or any of the strange and stupid things that are said about poetry and its place in

our lives, I suspect that the people doing the saying have had things pretty easy. A tough life needs a tough language – and that is what poetry is. That is what literature offers – a language powerful enough to say how it is. It isn't a hiding place. It is a finding place. ([Aguilar, 2013](#))

Poetry can tap into kids' interests. "Contrary to popular belief amongst kids, boys get really into poetry when brought in through rhythm and rhyme. It's the most kinesthetic of all literature, it's physical and full-bodied which activates your heart and soul and sometimes bypasses the traps of our minds and the outcome is that poetry moves us" ([Aguilar, 2013](#)). Students who don't usually like to write may realize that poetry is a form of writing they can enjoy, "with its dearth of fixed rules and its kinship with rap. For these students, poetry can become a gateway to other forms of writing" ([Simmons, 2014](#)). Poetry can also provide a way for teachers to connect curriculum to students' interests. If we pay attention to what students like, we can choose poems for them to explore that reflect their interests ([Nemec, 2021](#)).

As ELA teachers, we know that poetry helps build literacy skills covered in the Common Core, especially in [Reading](#) and [Writing](#), but these skills go beyond just the genre of poetry itself ([Simmons, 2014](#)). For example, poetry can help teach skills like precision of language, word choice, and grammar. "Students can learn how to utilize grammar in their own writing by studying how poets do – and do not – abide by traditional writing rules in their work" ([Simmons, 2014](#)). Through recitation or activities like spoken word or poetry slams, poetry can help teach [Speaking and Listening](#) skills and provide students with an authentic audience ([Aguilar, 2013](#)). Poetry can also foster [Language](#) and Media Literacy skills, because it "encourages us to consider the singular impact of each word in what we write. When a single tweet or facebook post can be vilified, and spread like wildfire, potentially ruining a young person's reputation, reading poetry can help children understand the impact of short-form language" ([Career Teachers, 2018](#)). At the same time, the ability to "understand the nuances of language, a key component of learning from poetry, can help students realise when language is used in advertising, the media and politics to manipulate them to make action" ([Career Teachers, 2018](#)).

Finally, there is the accessibility of poetry. Despite the fact that people think of poetry as cryptic, poet and professor Bridgette Bianca "cites poetry's way of expressing complex ideas, often in a short, simple format, as a benefit for kids" ([Nemec, 2021](#)). Similarly, "because poems defy rules, poetry can be made accessible for ELLs – poems can be easily scaffolded and students can find ways of expressing their voices while being limited in their vocabulary" ([Aguilar, 2013](#)). Not only that, but "[s]hort poems make a complete textual analysis more manageable for English language learners" ([Simmons, 2014](#)).

For all these reasons and more, it is essential to find a way to incorporate poetry into curriculum and instruction.

Poetry Opportunities for Students

Poetry Out Loud School Registration: [School registration](#) for [Vermont Poetry Out Loud](#) (POL) is currently open. POL is a poetry recitation contest that provides

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pathways for students to explore, memorize, and recite great contemporary and classic poetry and enhance presentation techniques. The program begins at the school level where students [use POL resources](#) to explore poetry and memorize at least one poem. Each school may move one student forward to recite two poems at the statewide semifinal contest. The program culminates with the state final competition on March 14, 2022. One Vermont student will be selected to represent the state at the national competition, competing for the top prize of \$20,000. [Registration is open](#). To participate, schools should register by December 31, 2021. For more information contact Troy Hickman at thickman@vermontartscouncil.org or at 802-402-4496 or visit the [Vermont Arts Council](#) website.

Young Writers Project – [YWP](#) is a community of young people who create and connect online through words, photos, and art. Since Young Writers Project started in 2006, more than 120,000 youth have participated in YWP – and for some it can be a life-changing experience. YWP's interactive website is the beating heart of the community. Publication of the best of 10,000 submissions to the site each year brings genuine affirmation to our writers, photographers, and artists. Most are between 13 and 18, most are from our home state of Vermont, but we welcome young people from everywhere! Thanks to generous individuals, businesses, and foundations, all programs are free! [JOIN TODAY!](#)

Articles Referenced

- [Five Reasons Why We Need Poetry in Schools](#), by Elena Aguilar, Edutopia, 2013.
- [Why Kids Need Poetry in Their Lives, and How to Spark Their Interest in It](#), by Jason Basa Nemecek, Washington Post, 2021.
- [Why Teaching Poetry in School is So Important](#), by Career Teachers, 2018.
- [Why Teaching Poetry Is So Important](#), by Andrew Simmons, The Atlantic, 2014.

Poetry Resources

- [National Poetry Month: Useful Resources for Teachers and Students](#) – This article from Edutopia includes an annotated list of linked resources to support teaching poetry.
- **PBS LearningMedia:** [Get Lit and the Power of Poetry](#) – Arts education can increase teen literacy through the power of spoken word. Inspire creative expression and social-emotional learning with this collection of culturally relevant narratives.

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