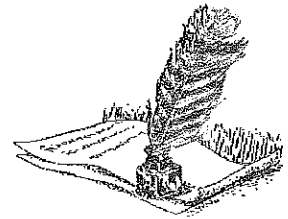


# The Classroom Coffeehouse: Teaching the Work of Living Poets

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## Introduction: Snapshot of a Classroom

In his most recent book of poetry, *Tatters*, Tennessee poet Bill Brown includes a juxtaposed image of himself and two family members:

Within a year my brother's hands  
bandaged soldiers in Vietnam,  
as my mother wrung her hands in  
prayer,  
and mine were busy banging out  
protest songs on a Sears guitar.

It's a troublesome image for some of our school's twelfth-grade English students, who read the entire book as part of their summer reading, mostly because of its indirect connection to an earlier line of the poem, an image of a snake that "to my joy / and my mother's jitters, my brother / lifted." How, the seniors wonder, does holding a snake relate to bandaging wounded soldiers? Is the mother's reaction an intentional link between the two images? Is the speaker of the poem condemning his brother or glorifying him?

We don't know the answers, but today we don't need to guess at them: Bill Brown is standing before the class, reading the poem aloud because the students asked him to. He's not what they expected, but he's all that they want in a poet: he has a beard, wears glasses and has on a sports coat over a black turtleneck and jeans; he reads while gesticulating with his hands and without dropping the endings of his lines; he pauses dramatically at the end of the poem, then smiles. Later that day, after the

poet has departed, one of the students comes back around to say, "That poem was okay before he read; but afterwards, it was great."

Of course, the poem doesn't change. It's Bill's story that evokes a change in the student's understanding of and appreciation for it, and even that story is not so much an addition to the narrative poem as it is a simple retelling of it. Hearing in Bill's own voice a description of the moment when he recalled that memory of his brother lifting a snake and simultaneously recalled him serving in a war, the students begin a process of connecting to the text—one can almost see the syntax and imagery sliding into place in their thinking as they read the poem a second and then a third time and raise their hands to ask still more questions. Later, when Bill asks them to write along with him, every pen goes to paper—they're sold on his excitement about the process.

Bill spends two days with the senior classes, alternately reading his work and asking them to write themselves, and by the time he's gone every student has a product he or she is excited about. The next week, when we ask the students to evaluate their experience with Bill, they rank it among the best classes of the year.

## Studying the Work of Living Poets: What It Gains Us

Not every teacher, of course, can easily invite a published poet into the classroom, and not every poet belongs there. Bill Brown has come to our school for several years as part of the annual Lau-

sanne Young Writers Symposium along with many others from around the state: Mark Jarmon from Nashville, Malcolm Glass from Clarksville, and spoken word poets IQ Sanders and Treasure Williams from Memphis, for instance. For students from the twenty or so schools who attend each year, it's a great opportunity to hear poets read and speak about their work, but it's not the only chance our students have to make a connection that goes beyond the page. Throughout the year, we use audio and video to add depth and dimension to the works we study. We ask students to communicate online about poems and to discuss them aloud. We study the "dead white guys," too—from William Shakespeare to William Carlos Williams—but such study is interspersed with readings of poets still alive, including local writers. In the case of our senior class, the students read an *entire book* of poetry by a Tennessee poet each year.

Why?

There are many benefits to a study of living poets, but here are a few that have inspired the teachers at our school:

- *Accessibility of language.* Contemporary poetry isn't always easy, but it sometimes offers syntax, diction, and imagery that draw students in and ease their anxieties about reading poetry. That's not to say, however, that the syntactical structures of John Donne or Emily Dickinson aren't worth parsing, nor is it to argue that reading Bill Brown's poems doesn't require a discussion of other tools such as enjambment, open form, and context-specific vocabulary.
- *A chance to hear (and interact) as well as read.* We bring some poets to our school—others arrive by compact disc or YouTube. Either way, the chance to hear poets read their work is invaluable.
- *The opportunity to read an entire book of poetry.* Sure, students could—and do, sometimes—read entire books by older poets. There's something special, though, about reading a chapbook or short collection of recently published poems. For one thing, because these poets and their poems are not part

of the established canon, students have the opportunity to discover that even the best poets don't write a classic every time they put pen to paper. As a result, students see the poets as more human, more like them. Thus, the students become instant critics, and they don't usually feel compelled to like everything in the book (we often compare the experience to listening to a new CD rather than an artist's greatest hits compilation—the new CD may have some songs you love, others you grow to love, and some you never like). Along these same lines runs another benefit for teaching such works:

- *A chance to understand publishing from the bottom up.* Our students are accustomed to textbooks and Penguin classics. Most contemporary poetry collections aren't the glossy, mass-produced products we often share with classes; they're often printed in small editions by small presses. It's interesting to talk with students about the nature of such writing and publishing and the place of unique voices in a society that tends toward mass production. It's also interesting to discuss the role of the internet in dispersing individual voices and texts.
- *The critical review as a writing assignment.* Too often, our students write analytical essays in a very formal style for an audience of one (the teacher) and care little about what they write. The critical review, modeled on examples from newspapers or magazines, is a natural, real-world form that requires all of the writing and argumentation of the formal essay but brings to it a different sense of structure, audience, and purpose.
- *Exposure to diverse voices.* Contemporary poetry brings with it the chance to hear the voices of different races, genders, religions, and nationalities in a way the canon of literature rarely does.

So much for reasons—but what about strategies? Without Bill Brown in your classroom physically, how does it work?

## A Sample Lesson Using Living Poets

Not only is imitation the sincerest form of flattery, but it is also a useful way to help students better understand the craft elements of poetry. Though it would be ideal to see a living poet go through the process of writing a poem from initial idea through finished piece in the classroom, given the creative process of most poets, it would be unrealistic to expect this to be satisfying or productive for the poet. An alternative to this is to have the students make an effort at imitating the style of a chosen poet by creating a poetic “forgery.”

This activity gives the students first-hand experience both in analyzing the featured poet’s craft elements—form, word choice, word order, motifs, etc.—and in attempting to “copy” that poet’s style in a very popular classroom contest. Here’s the basic concept: students closely read a selection of a given poet’s work—usually a number of poems from a particular collection—with an eye on discovering what poetic elements are consistent among the poems they read. For example, some of the features of former U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins’s poetry are his unusual titles (“Taking Off Emily Dickinson’s Clothes,” “Shoveling Snow with Buddha,” and “Another Reason Why I Don’t Keep a Gun in the House”) and his unique perspective on both everyday and esoteric subjects. The themes, diction, and tone of his poems combine to create a certain dead-pan quality that is not unlike the humor of comedian Stephen Wright:

*“If toast always lands butter-side down,  
and cats always land on their feet, what  
happens if you strap toast on the back  
of a cat and drop it?”*

Another example of a poet who begs for imitation is Donald Hall, whose work during the years preceding and immediately following the death of his wife, poet Jane Kenyon, was a tableau of verse about the nature of suffering, dying, and grieving.

Once the students have gotten a handle on the general and specific craft elements of the guest poet with whom they will work, they then write a poem in the style of the featured poet and try to pass their work off as the poet’s own in a classroom contest.

The outline in the following pages offers a more formalized version of this lesson plan, which may be contracted or expanded to fit a teacher’s needs.

## Stump the Chumps: A Poetic Forgery Contest

### Learning Objectives

In this lesson, students will:

- be introduced to poetry written by a living poet with whom they will eventually interact in a classroom setting;
- engage in numerous close readings of that poet’s work;
- examine the craft elements at work in their selected poems in order to identify the components that make the poems “work” individually and collectively;
- create poems of their own that mimic the style of the featured poet;
- read aloud both their own poem and those of the guest poet;
- critically examine other students’ work to determine what separates the work of an accomplished poet from the work of a poetry student.

*Time Frame:* Three class periods (may be adjusted)

*Resources and Materials:* Copies of Bill Brown’s *Tatters* (or other suitable collections)

*Preparation:* Give each student the same ten poems—or collection of poems—written by Bill Brown prior to the class meeting in which Bill will read some of his other pieces.

### Class session #1

Step one:

- Divide the class into 4-5 teams. Have them spend a few minutes coming up with a catchy name for themselves.
- Give each group one of Bill Brown’s poems.
- Assign the following tasks to the team:
  - facilitator
  - reader
  - scribe

- presenter(s)
- Instruct each group to discuss its assigned poem (you may wish to create, first, a group understanding of poetic analysis—what are the questions the group might ask?).
- Have each team present a general analysis of its assigned poem to the class. The groups that are not presenting should take notes.
- Facilitate a class discussion, focusing on the effectiveness of the individual groups' analyses of the poems.

#### Step Two:

Engage in group discussion about the craft elements that are identifiable across the poems that have been read aloud in class—imagery, metaphor, rhyme, etc.

- Compare these elements to those at work in any of the other poems from the collection they read on their own.
- Agree upon a list of elements that characterize the poems the class will read.

#### Class session #2

- Begin this class by listening together to the poet read several of his or her works aloud (resources for this step are included below).
- Have students begin creating their own poetic imitations of Bill Brown's poetry.
- Circulate in your classroom and, with positive reinforcement, help students assess to what extent they have been successful in including elements that characterize Brown's work.

#### Class session #3

- Each student reads three poems aloud: two of Brown's which other students have not read, if possible, and the student's imitation.
- The class votes (via thumbs up or down) on which of the poems read are Brown's and which poem is the student's.
- When the voting is done, ask students to share (or write about) what they've learned

about Brown's poetry, poetry in general, and the writing process from this exercise.

#### More Ideas

Once our students have read work by a living poet and tried their hands at writing, we call upon the numerous resources available through today's technology that make studying a living writer a different experience from studying older authors. Here are a few ideas for broadening a student's experience with such a poet:

- *Look for critical reviews of the poet's work.* Our students, for instance, found a review of *Tatters* by looking online at the *Nashville Scene* web page (Nashville's alternative weekly newspaper). They then wrote reviews of the book themselves, with clear instructions to make judgments backed up by evidence. This assignment is a refreshing alternative to the more common formal essay.
- *Look for interviews with the poet.* Imagine how interesting it would have been to hear, say, John Milton discussing his composition process for *Paradise Lost*—with living poets, that possibility is very real.
- *Write the poet a letter.* One student we know found an Ohio poet's email address and began a correspondence about the image from a single poem. You might, of course, help students consider the form and etiquette of letter writing before letting them loose on a bevy of unsuspecting authors.
- *Invite the poet to speak.* Many poets appreciate the chance to speak about their work with students—you never know when one might be willing to come to your school and meet students in person.

#### Audio, Video, and the Internet: Bringing Poets to the Classroom

*"The poet's voice need not merely be the*

*record of man, it can be one of the  
props, the pillars to help him endure  
and prevail."*

—William Faulkner

Hearing Bill Brown read and discuss his work in the classroom is like attending a small, private poetry reading. Yet not every school, teacher, or student will have the kind of relationships that will give them access to living poets and their work. Fortunately, the Internet provides access to audio and video recordings of the work of a wide array of living—and dead—poets that will help foster and enhance the learning experience for poetry students. What follows is a short list of annotated Internet resources for poetry:

- **The Library of Congress Poetry Page:**  
<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/>

If you were a poetry lover (or poetry teacher) stuck on a desert island and could visit only one website, this would be the one. It contains links to information about current and past U.S. Poets Laureate, poetry webcast, poetry news and events, and has a plethora of useful resources for teachers and students. Best of all, readers can link to the Archive of Recorded Poetry & Literature, where recordings of over 2,000 poets reading their work are available on-line.

- **Poets.org:** <http://www.poets.org/audio.php>

Every educator and devotee of poetry should have this site bookmarked. It features an attractive lay-out; is easy to navigate and “spotlights” poets, poems, audios, and essays on the site’s front page. In addition to its National Poetry Calendar and impressive resources for teachers, anyone can subscribe to receive an RSS feed that provides regular updates on new poems, essays, features, and bulletins.

- **Laurable.com:** <http://www.laurable.com/>  
This is another great site for those teaching poetry who want their students to have the experience of hearing poets read their work. The site’s home page provides access to readings by almost 500 poets and thousands of links to all sorts of poetry audio, including interviews and an Internet news webfeed that automatically

generates up to 20 links from news services across the web just by using the keywords: poet, poets, poetry, poem, and poems.

- **Poetry Out Loud:** <http://www.poetryoutloud.org/>

For teachers who want a truly unique opportunity for their students to engage in the world of spoken poetry, check out the site that is home to the National Endowment for the Arts & Poetry Foundation’s national poetry recitation contest, *Poetry Out Loud*. Annually, students from across the country compete in qualifying events from the local to the national level to determine who gives the best poetry recitation. The site provides information about the program including poems, guides for teachers, news and events, and video of recent contest winners.

Still want more sites to peruse? Here’s a list of interesting links:

- **British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC Poetry Site)**  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/poetry/outloud/>
- **About.com: Poetry**  
[http://poetry.about.com/od/audiopoetry/Audio\\_Poetry\\_Archives\\_Anthologies.htm](http://poetry.about.com/od/audiopoetry/Audio_Poetry_Archives_Anthologies.htm)
- **Poetry Aloud: A Directory of Poetry Reading**  
[www.gpc.edu/~shale/humanities/composition/handouts/poetryaloud.html](http://www.gpc.edu/~shale/humanities/composition/handouts/poetryaloud.html)
- **Griffin Poetry Prize website**  
<http://www.griffinpoetryprize.com/podcast/index.html>

## Conclusion

The bell has rung; school’s out. Yet there’s still one more student hanging around in the classroom, showing Bill Brown a poem she wrote in class but was too shy to read for the whole group. He praises an image or two, makes a comment about the ending, and suggests she email it to him after she produces a typed draft.

The student may or may not finish the poem; she may or may not become a writer herself. But she has experienced poetry as a living art form,

something more vital and vibrant than just a bunch of rhyming words on the page of a textbook. Even if she doesn't rush out to the bookstore to pick up a book by Mary Oliver, when she reads Wordsworth and Keats in class next week she'll have a different understanding of the process and effort put forth by poets who were, long ago, also contemporary writers. And, too, she may just keep an eye out for Bill's poems and readings in the future. She may even decide she's someone who *likes* poetry, who *gets* it, who wants to read.

### Works Cited

Brown, Bill. *Tatters*. Greensboro, NC: March Street Press, 2007.

