6 Considering Values: The Poetic Function of Language

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> "When did you first realize that you wanted to become a poet?" My question is "when did other people give up the idea of being a poet?" You know, when we are kids we make up things, we write, and for me the puzzle is not that some people are still writing, the real question is why did the other people stop?
>
> William Stafford
> *Writing the Australian Crawl*

Somewhere along the line, I think about sixth grade, our system of mass education gives up on creative writing as a useful learning experience. The rationale seems to be that true proficiency in creative writing is a gift from the gods given to the inspired few who are predestined to become great artists no matter what their educational experience, and that further opportunities for everyone else to write poetically serves no useful purpose. Nevertheless, creativity continues to have eloquent advocates. One of them, Jacob Bronowski, has written on the motivation, pleasure, creativity, and commitment of both the scientist and artist at work. His representation of the individual's unique sense of self when exploring for new knowledge, whether in science or art, should be experienced by students in all disciplines.

> The need of the age gives its shape to scientific progress as a whole. But it is not the need of the age which gives the individual scientist his sense of pleasure and excitement which keeps him working late into the night when all the useful typists have gone home at five o'clock. He is personally involved in his work, as the poet in his, as the artist is in the painting. Paints and painting too must have been made for useful ends, and language was developed, from whatever beginnings, for practical communication. Yet you cannot have a man handle paints or language or the symbolic concepts of physics, you cannot even have him stain a microscopic slide, without instantly waking in him a pleasure in the very language, a sense of exploring his own activity. This sense lies at the heart of creation.[1]

Creative writing is one important way to wake in a student "a pleasure in the very language, a sense of exploring his own activity," and this can be done in science, humanities, business, or engineering courses. We are familiar with testimonials from many sources which acknowledge that the creative impulse is central to the development, understanding, and application of knowledge. Reasoning by analogy and communicating by metaphor are generally recognized as integral strategies of successful thinkers and writers in every discipline.

This chapter describes ways that the poetic function of language can be used to develop students' abilities to learn and write in any field of study. In Nancy Martin's words:

> We wouldn't claim to understand fully what happens when children's imagination is brought into play, but in its widest sense we would regard imagination as that mental process which enables a person to make his own connections, whether this happens to be in the sciences or in the arts. It may be that those moments are rare when an "imaginative leap" opens up new patterns and new perspectives for others, but unless we provide many opportunities all over the curriculum for children to use their imaginations more extensively, their knowledge will remain inert.[2]

Most teachers, regardless of grade level, would like students to use their imaginations and make personal value assessments when learning new materials. James Britton puts it this way:

> As the stories children write (whether autobiographical or fictional) become "shaped stories," more art-like, they move from Expressive towards the Poetic. The more "shaped" they become, the more effectively they enable writers to explore and express their *values*, those ways of feeling and believing about the world that make us the sorts of people we are.[3]

The poetic function of written language becomes important when individuals attempt to relate new knowledge to their value systems. People use language poetically to serve a wide variety of functions in their lives; this chapter explains how poetic language helps students assess knowledge in terms of their own systems of beliefs. Poetic writing in its most familiar and completed forms is what most of us would recognize as, among other things, poetry, stories, plays, and parables. All teachers, of course, need not become creative writing teachers in some formal sense, but teachers from all disciplines can elicit creative language—and thus creative thinking—from students. All functions of language assist in shaping our beliefs, but poetic language especially helps us understand the now familiar dicta from physics and poetry that one cannot separate the observer from the observed, the dancer from the dance.

Characteristics of the Poetic

To return for a moment to the theoretical model discussed earlier in this book, James Britton asserts that written language begins in the *expressive* and then moves outward from the self along a continuum toward either *transactional or poetic.*[4] (See Figure 1.) The purpose of language

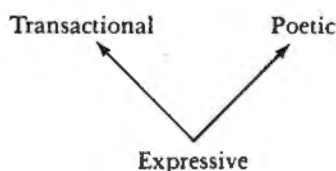

Figure 1.

which moves along the continuum from expressive to transactional language is to get things done. The purpose of language which moves along the continuum from expressive to poetic is to develop and examine knowledge in the light of one's own value system—poetic language is important *for its own sake.* With expressive language as the base, both transactional and poetic language should be effective capacities of every individual—one taps the gift of reason and one the gift of imagination—and both gifts can be developed by using written language. Figure 2 offers a more elaborate diagram.

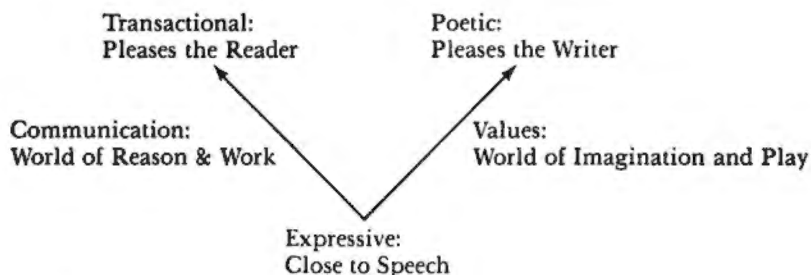

Figure 2.

Expressive to Poetic

In cases where the writing tends to the poetic but is not "shaped," we recognize the poetic by writing's function rather than by its form. Such writing occurs at an intermediary point along Britton's expressive-

poetic continuum, where form may not be very well developed, but function—to evaluate new experience in the light of past experience—can be very significant pedagogically (Figure 3). By way of illustration consider two short informal paragraphs in which American Literature

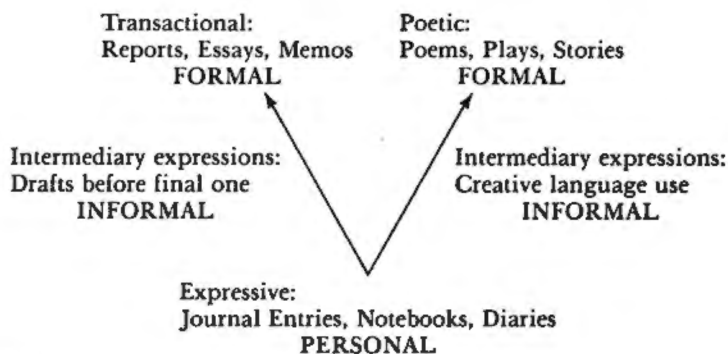

Figure 3.

students evaluate Emily Dickinson's relationship with nature in terms of their own understanding of nature.

> Being a satisfied disciple of Jesus Christ, I disagree with the importance Emily places on nature. She sees nature as a parent and the rest of the world under her care. Humans were never intended to be "mothered" by nature. Instead, as according to Genesis 1:26, God placed human life above every other lifeform (Then God said, "Let us make a man—someone like ourselves, to be the master of all life upon the earth and in the skies and in the seas"). According to this, I believe man has total power over nature in that he can use it in any way he can and sees fit.

> They had a moral code. Now I understand, mind you, that some people rebelled against it, but at least there was something to rebel *against.* They knew where they were, and so the courageous ones could strike out on their own, *from* someplace *to* someplace. They had a culture. We either don't have one or have one too embarrassing to admit to. I can never decide which. I think maybe I'm just writing this on a bad day, because even tho I'm no Puritan, I think I would rather be there than here. The only thing this has to do with Emily D. is that I started feeling this way reading her letters.

These students are making connections in writing between themselves and what they are learning—making connections between the subject matter of the course and their own feelings and beliefs.

Personal Knowledge

New knowledge always confronts an individual's value system. The knowledge might be *dismissed* as inaccurate or irrelevant because the individual cannot cope with its validity and maintain some value system; the knowledge might be *assimilated* and radically alter an individual's value system by challenging and changing its assumptions at the core; or the knowledge might interact significantly with the individual's value system and be *accommodated* as enriching or refining the individual's value system. After students have reacted personally in writing to the material, opportunities for further study should be provided—to analyze, synthesize, verify or dismiss, assimilate, accommodate. In the student examples above, such study might focus on the nineteenth-century transcendentalism/fundamentalism debate, the protestant work ethic in American culture—then and now, the contemporary environmentalist/developer controversies, or further study of nature in the works of Emily Dickinson and other American writers, such as Emerson, Whitman, and Melville.

Unless students tune-out, or play the game of giving the teacher only what they assume the teacher wants to hear, students respond to what we teach by making knowledge meaningful to themselves or—as they often say in their writings—by discovering how they "feel" about it. When students explore this process in writing, they produce a document which they can assess in terms of personal values and which, in conjunction with other written assessments, provides visual access to self-knowledge—a traditional goal of liberal education. Teachers can use this kind of student writing to make the content of the course—whether American literature, economic history, or Cartesian philosophy—accessible and meaningful to students. As students grow in knowledge, they should be encouraged to make it personal and thereby grow in understanding and responsibility—in one sense *the final test* of a purposeful and humane education.

The Self-Conscious Question

In addition to asking students to relate class material to personal concerns, a teacher can ask students to write informally in preparation for a formal assignment (whether an essay, a lab report, a reading assignment, or an objective test). Janet Emig, in her analysis of the composing process of student writers, notes the kinds of things students think about as they write, but also notes the things they never appear to think about. At no time does any of the students ask aloud any variants of the questions: "Is this subject important to me?" "Do I care about

writing about it?"[5] Such questions make excellent expressive → poetic writing assignments in any class.

> Why should I study microbiology?
> Is European literature important to me?
> What did I learn from today's lecture on Jeffersonian democracy?
> Am I interested in doing a case study for Personal Finance?
> How is writing this forestry paper going to help me be a forester?
> Why do teachers make us write all the time?

Such questions, when asked aloud and then responded to in writing (and class discussion), diminish the alienation of classroom assignments from the student's own sense of purpose and motivation.

Student Examples

Below are passages from two students who were asked to respond briefly (in class) to the question: Why write a formal (transactional) paper on a work of literature?

> By writing a formal paper, you want to get an idea across clearly, neatly, and concisely. You want your reader to be able to go through it and understand immediately what you are saying without having them stop and ask questions—about your purpose or grammar and spelling mistakes. You write a formal paper to make sure you don't make mistakes, to make sure you're organized, and to make sure you don't leave anything out, by using an outline, a rough draft, and proofreading.

> Writing a formal paper on a literary topic helps the student to understand what the author is trying to get across. When I sat down to write about the poems of e. e. cummings, I did not really understand his poetry in the least. But when I started to write, the process of putting the words down on paper opened up the poems. I think that English teachers know that the student tends to read and not comprehend what he is reading. By making the student write an assignment on the whole or a specific aspect of a literary work, the teacher is doing the student a great service. The same is true of any subject, even "Why do you write a formal paper." It forces the student to think about what he is doing, and in the process sets off a chain reaction of thinking about the subject and things related to the subject.

Students write for a variety of reasons—and to please the teacher is among the most important to them. In asking students to evaluate various assignments, written or otherwise, and to do such a task *for its own sake* is to provide them with the opportunity to discriminate among the different functions of language, to confront the personal as well as the social significance of the material they are asked to

learn, to recognize distinctions between exterior restraints (to please a reader) and interior motivation (to comprehend and communicate knowledge), to use written language to make connections and imagine possibilities, and to discover and communicate specific information.

Forms of the Poetic

Thus far I have discussed the function of poetic writing when it is close to the expressive, that is when the form—perhaps informal essays and journal entries—is related only to the student, and learning, imagining, and evaluating (dismissing, assimilating, accommodating) are unencumbered by the demands of rhetorical purpose and an expectant audience. Further along the continuum from self-expressive language to the more formally poetic, form becomes important. The experience of writing in poetic form transforms thought and assists the writer in achieving the personal (evaluating new experience) and social (imaginative empathy and insight) purposes of the poetic.

The familiar forms of stories, plays, poems, as well as numerous other forms of the poetic are readily available for classroom use; examples include monologs, dialogs, role-playing scenarios, interviews, scripts, aphorisms, epigrams, parables, and fictive or dramatic techniques applied to traditional transactional forms: case studies, letters, informative reports, and persuasive essays. The process of writing to the demands of poetic form alters expression of content and produces new perceptions of experience, which in turn provides the necessary distance for the individual involved in the self-examination of values.

The Writer's Stance and Distance

Poetic form creates a sense of distance. Its distinctive function as a learning tool is to draw the writer into a different role or stance. Transactional writing accomplishes something else—persuades, informs, deceives, or whatever—and in this sense commits the writer to the role of *participant* in the action with a demonstrable stake in its success. Poetic writing exists for its own sake—to please, reveal, be—and in this sense the writer's stance is as a *spectator* within the active process of creation.[6] Figure 4 offers another perspective on our diagram.

Participant writing involves a self-interested part of the writer attempting to accomplish an actual task in a limited world (a lab report, an environmental-impact statement). Spectator writing involves the whole writer attempting to imagine his total world in response to new

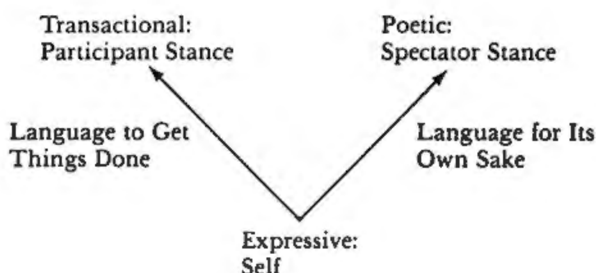

Figure 4.

experience (reading the *Communist Manifesto* or doing a problem in quantum mechanics). Poetic writing pleases and surprises—it is a place for play, imaginative thinking, developing personal knowledge. In its creation it places form above self and in this sense the writer is a spectator.

The spectator stance in poetic writing engages the writer's values. Thus while we say that for the writer poetic writing exists for its own sake, it also serves social and pedagogical purposes in the community and the classroom by developing access to and understanding of value-related activities. We must take pleasure (the poetic) in our purpose (the transactional), that is, make purpose right with the self by understanding the value implications of our actions and beliefs. The poetic function of language provides this distinctive way of assessing experience. As James Britton says, poetic language is the language of being and becoming.

Student Examples

My experience convinces me that students value poetic language and can recognize and articulate the characteristics of the poetic writing experience. What follows are representative excerpts from freshman students, all majoring in science, business, and engineering. They were asked to evaluate the experience of writing four "imaginative writes" during a literature course in which they also wrote various expressive and transactional pieces. Three of the imaginative writes were related to the novels they read: (1) a monolog from the point of view of a particularly obnoxious character; (2) a dialog by two characters which takes place five years after the novel ends; and (3) a brief story focusing on one character in a man/woman situation. The fourth assignment was a poem on a topic and in a style of their choice. The informal responses were done in class in about fifteen minutes; no discussion regarding the purpose of "imaginative writes" preceded the writing of these responses.

> The imaginative writes that we have done for this class have been interesting and fun. They also have taught how to express ideas in an enjoyable way. . . . Most of the time I surprise myself along the way. It is interesting to see how my mind develops an idea to a point I haven't planned. It is more fun to try to please someone than to inform them. By being more fun it is easier than formal prose. Imaginative writing develops the creativity of the writer. This is still another way of developing different points of view.

> I think that I actually do enjoy creative writing and just the opportunity to be able to have anything you want happen to the characters. It is true that I actually tend to depict them pretty much as before but I still get the chance to see what it is like to be an author. That provides me with more motivation to do the other assignments. Looking back just now, I realize that when I have some character do something it is most likely to be in the manner in which I see that group in which the person can be classified. That is, I have women doing what I see as the role of women, doctors doing what I see as the role of doctors, etc. I suppose that that is, actually, an indication as to what I am like, believe and see as important. Probably a useful self analysis.

> I really enjoyed the writing we've done that was imaginary and you had to interpret actions and characters yourself. I did *no* creative writing in high school and it was really fun to express my feelings and ideas without worrying about a grade or grammar. I enjoyed writing the poem, just to know I could write one and be a little creative. I felt that in the poem and the other imaginative ones, I was expressing more of myself and my feelings than in the other writing assignments we've done. Pretending to be a character and think and act for them also helped define exactly how I viewed them and their relationship in the novel.

> I get a pretty neat feeling when I write imaginative essays. I feel in control. I can make the story take any turn I want to. For instance, I didn't like the idea of Anita and Shepherd hitting it off great, so in my essay I decided to write that they were having marital problems. I felt great because I had the chance to express my ideas of what the book should have in it. In real life you have to accept the past the way it was. You can't go around changing it to suit your life. But when I write these essays I have the freedom to change anything. I can write anything I want and know that there is no right or wrong answer.

From the students' point of view poetic writing is valuable for its own sake. Poetic writing *on the subject matter of the class* (in this case, literature) is a unique kind of composing which demands a different stance from the writer toward language, experience, audience, and subject matter. It involves different emotional sensibilities and cognitive operations; and it provides the freedom important to making

imaginative connections and realizing values. It also shares with expressive and transactional writing the function of enabling students to better understand course material they are studying.

Most of my students write many more words in their imaginative writes than in their formal ones, and yet many feel a little guilty because it is so easy and so much fun. Most students spend many hours working on these "easy" and "enjoyable" assignments. Creative writing exercises in nonwriting classes may produce surprise or even bewilderment among students, but they should have the opportunity to use the poetic function of writing throughout their education.

Classroom Exercises.

Here are some examples of poetic writing exercises that will enable students to reflect on the subject matter of the course.

Informal, imaginative essays. Such assignments encourage students to develop and clarify their personal value systems in response to course material. Possibilities include: (1) the "What if . . ." assignment (What if a four-lane highway were built in a specific rural area? What if the A-bomb had not been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki as the way to end World War II?); (2) the "I feel . . ." assignment (I feel American race relations could be eased by . . . , I feel the computer industry will . . .); and (3) the "Value of . . ." assignment (the value of the engineer's professional code is . . . , the value of anti-trust legislation is . . . , the value of Picasso's work is . . .).

Role-playing. These exercises ask students to imagine, dramatically, how they would behave or what they would do in specified situations, past, present, or future. Some examples include: (1) for a marketing class—write a descriptive scenario from the point of view of a senior citizen shopping at a local grocery store; (2) for an anthropology class—consider from the point of view of a Laplander your new ownership of a snowmobile; (3) for a political science class—write a series of three monologs on the recent Supreme Court decision on police access to media documents from the point of view of a thankful police officer, a shocked reporter, and a U.S. Senator considering options to mitigate or change the decision; (4) for an American literature class—write a dialog between Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman discussing the role of nature in their lives; (5) for a philosophy class—compose graffiti ("God is Dead"—Nietzsche, "Nietzsche is Dead"—God); (6) for a mathematics class—interview fellow students on how they solve homework problems and then write brief reports from the interviewees points of view using their exact words wherever possible; and (7) for a nursing class—present a case study of a terminal cancer patient in the

year 2000 with specific reference to how death with dignity issues will be handled at that time.

Metaphors and parables. Analogy is widely associated with creative thinking as a way of making knowledge meaningful. These exercises ask students to write about new knowledge in metaphors and parables; they also demonstrate how professionals in specific fields use these language devices in their own writing. The following parable might be distributed in either a science or a humanities class.

The Parable of the Pike

> Placed in a tank with some minnows but separated from them by a sheet of glass, the pike bangs its head for some time in an effort to get at them. At length it sensibly gives up the effort. Much less sensibly, it continues to ignore the minnows after the glass is removed; it fails to reevaluate the situation. In other words, it becomes a dogmatist.[7]

Students can write on what the parable says about scientific method and enquiry or about one possible human response to experience. They can write and compare their own imitative parables. They can write a parable about another subject using the pike as a metaphor or something of their own invention. Students in science, engineering, and humanities classes can study in the following passage Albert Einstein's use of metaphoric language to make new knowledge comprehensible and right with the self.

> Physical concepts are free creations of the human mind, and are not, however it may seem, uniquely determined by the external world. In our endeavor to understand reality we are somewhat like a man trying to understand the mechanism of a closed watch. He sees the face and the moving hands, even hears its ticking, but he has no way of opening the case. If he is ingenious he may form some picture of a mechanism which could be responsible for all the things he observed, but he may never be quite sure his picture is the only one which could explain his observations. He will never be able to compare his picture with the real mechanism and he cannot even imagine the possibility of the meaning of such a comparison.[8]

Students can write using the metaphor of the watch in many areas of intellectual concern. And when they do, information that is not new to us teachers but is new to our students can be better understood by their relating the new to the familiar. Such exercises provide students with the opportunity to make knowledge their own.

Stories, dramas, poems. These more recognizable forms of the poetic need not be limited to literature classes. Students can be given such assignments with very little preparation, for while most have not

written much in these forms in high school or college, in either English or other classes, they "know" how to go about it. Such assignments can be made specific to the course content as well as made more general as exercises in imagination, value assessment, and poetic language. Some examples of specific course-related assignments include: (1) in recreational geography—write a play for campers at a nearby urban park; (2) in genetics—write a story on the cloning of prize beef cattle; (3) in French—write a poem on language and cultural idiosyncrasies; (4) in mechanical engineering—write a short parody of the textbook; and (5) in literature—write an epilogue to *Huckleberry Finn* in which Huck meets up again with Tom Sawyer. In addition to writing assignments that originate with the teacher, students will have appropriate suggestions of their own.

Poetry and Philosophy

In an Introduction to Philosophy class at Michigan Tech, the instructor had assigned the first two "Meditations" by René Descartes for reading and study prior to class discussion. This is a particularly difficult reading assignment for most people, but especially for students without prior experience in philosophy. After the class discussion the teacher assigned a poem to be written on the subject of the two "Meditations." Prior to this assignment students had not written creatively in this class (indeed the teacher had never given creative writing assignments before), and only by chance had they previously read two limericks on Berkeley which were in their textbook. The teacher gave no further instructions except to say that the poem could be in any form and style and would not be graded. When he collected the poems later in the week he asked each student to write for ten minutes on the experience of writing the poem. Here is a representative sample of the writings.

> Descartes said,
> Do I really have a head?
> Maybe it's a perception
> or possibly a deception.
> Everything I have known
> is somewhat doubtful
> but still, highly probable.
>
> Yet I have shown
> it to be, more reasonable
> to believe than to deny in full.
>
> Some malignant demon
> who is at once exceedingly
> potent and deceitful,

has taken to it ardently
to deceive me in full
and that all things be illusions.

Doubtless, then, I exist
since I am deceived.
And never will I cease to exist
as long as in my mind it is conceived.

What am I?
I'm a thinking thing.
What's a thinking thing?
It's a thing that doubts, affirms and conceives
and it also understands, imagines and perceives
All of these am I.

To look at objects that are known
let's use as example, fresh cut beeswax.
Melt it down, and yet remains beeswax.
Thus it can be shown
that it is an intuition of the mind,
and the same of all its kind.

Thus it is that bodies are perceived
by intellectual thought, and not by sight or touch.
Thus it can be conceived
that it is my mind that does this much.

I thought that writing a poem about Descartes and his meditations was an interesting way to get through them. It made me go over the reading more carefully than I had done before, resulting in catching of a few more points that he had made. Overall I would say that this experience resulted in a more thorough understanding and a deeper learning experience on my part.

Existence I Think

Here I sit in thought I ponder
The truth, existence, this I wonder
Are my senses true? I reason—
or illusion, tricks, confusions.
Are there Demons, beings evil
Trick me make me think I'm real
Is this body here I see
Just a vision or is it me?
Can I say I really exist
I need facts, reasons for this!
In my mind I think these thoughts,
For existence so hard I fought
Strike down this demon with a blow
With a Gods unearthly glow
With this God benevolent and kind
I create me in my mind
So conclusions, this I find
I exist—within my mind!

I thought the exercise was interesting because: (1) I had to review the readings; (2) I had to plan the verse I wrote; (3) Word choice was critical; (4) Organization was important and difficult; (5) Do you know of a word that rhymes with reason? Overall I enjoyed the assignment for nonrational reasons!

Descarte
Philosopher

UNSURE
Questioned
mind, body
Statement
not true if can be false
Sense Experience
Cartesian Demon
Deceived

SURE
Exists
to be deceived have to be here
Cogito Ergo Sum
What am I?
Res Cogitans
Physical World?
Bees Wax
Melt, change
Still Bees Wax?
Yes!
Physical Objects
Intuition of the Mind!

I thought it was a good idea. Poem writing is difficult for me, but since we could do it any way we wanted it was fun and at the same time it was a good review over Descartes' *Meditations.* It gave me a chance to pick out key points and stress them. I am sure they will stay with me longer. It was a good learner tool, I think you should use it again.

I thought that I would have a beer,
And contemplate if I was here
But then it was reconfirmed,
When I flunked winter term.

Writing this poem was easy and kind of fun.

This brief poetic writing exercise was an important learning experience for many of the students for the following reasons: significant ideas in Descartes' *Meditations* were reread and ordered; students' assessed the study of philosophy in general and Descartes in particular;

"imaginative connections" were made on the subject matter of philosophy; student writers played with language and ideas; metaphor and analogy were used for expression and thought; writing poetry became fun and easy, even though it took time and thought; abstract thought was transformed to personal understanding; new knowledge was shaped in relation to individual feelings and beliefs; speculation occurred about the significance of this learning experience; language and thought were appreciated for their own sake.

At the conclusion of this exercise, the philosophy instructor and I discussed ways in which the value of the exercise might be amplified for the class through oral presentations and discussion within the classroom. I asked the instructor if he would take about twenty minutes and jot down informally his impressions of the assignment. Here is what he wrote.

> I made the poetry writing assignment with considerable trepidation. I expected my students to either not do it, or make a very minimal effort. I also expected them to tell me that writing a poem on Descartes' *Meditations* was the dumbest writing assignment they had ever had.
>
> As far as the learning aspect of the assignment is concerned, I hoped the students would have to reread the *Meditations*, think about the major points Descartes is making in order to pick a "topic" for the poem and, finally, to attempt to better understand one or more of these major points in order to actually write the poem. In brief, I hoped the assignment would force the students to actively seek a better understanding of a difficult philosophical work.
>
> Overall, I am pleased with the way the assignment worked out. Out of thirty-two students, only eight chose not to write a poem. Their reasons were probably varied. Some were absent the day I made the assignment. Some did not think it was worth the effort. The responses of those who did make the effort were almost all positive—indeed, very positive. So much for my fear of my students thinking I was giving them a "dumb" assignment.
>
> I was quite pleased with the poems. While some of them are obviously a rush job, a goodly number show evidence of serious thought. I am convinced that the majority of my students reread the *Meditations* and seriously tried to understand what Descartes is saying. I regard this assignment as a definite pedagogical success. My only reservation about such writing is the propriety of giving students homework which has virtually no impact on their grade.
>
> The assignment produced three surprises for me. The first surprise was the unexpected high number of "good" poems. The second surprise was the enthusiasm of many of the students. The final surprise was the relatively high inverse correlation between students who did well on the poems and those who did well on essay exams.[9]

Responding to the Poetic

When reading and responding to student poetic writings teachers must take their cues from both the purpose of the exercises and the stance of the student writer. The purpose is to relate course material to personal values using poetic language; the stance of the poetic writer is as a spectator. Thus, as students themselves are quick to point out when they write about it, responses from the reader of true or false, right or wrong, good or bad, are not relevant. Readers, including teachers, classmates, and perhaps others, are invited in such writing to share in the writer's experience—the pleasure of the self being and becoming—and they must respect this purpose in the invitation. Poetic writing, as opposed to transactional writing, is not written primarily to please the readers, but the writer. Readers of poetic writing must also adopt a spectator stance (suspend judgment) rather than a participant stance (critical judgment) in order to properly respond to the student's experience. The purpose of poetic writing in subject matter courses is not to teach creative writing or literary analysis, but to provide a unique opportunity for students to engage course material. Needless to say, to formally assign a grade to such writings is an inappropriate teacher response, and it is for this reason that I label such assignments "informal." Yet we must address the philosophy teacher's concern about the propriety of assigning homework which is not graded. How can a teacher sensibly respond to this particular kind of student writing?

Community Sharing and the Value of Talk

Responses (oral and written) to poetic writing should come from the teacher, from classmates, and from the writer himself. The purposes of such responses should be (1) to increase knowledge about the activity of using poetic language, (2) to provide suggestions for further exploration of course subject matter in relation to the student writer's own values and feelings, and (3) to develop a supportive environment for further growth and development of the students as poetic writers, creative thinkers, and responsible persons. All of the exercises that follow are assigned with the intention that they be shared in the classroom with teachers and fellow students; the students should realize this at the outset. Some students will want to write things they don't wish to share with anyone, or some things they may wish to share with only the teachers. The desire for these kinds of expressive writing experiences should be encouraged, but students should *also* be asked to write what can be and will be shared. The value of talk in this

context cannot be underestimated. Classroom talk about student writing provides further opportunity to express, clarify, negotiate, verify, motivate, and "make connections."

Class Exercises

As you read the following descriptions of classroom exercises, you may wish to keep in mind two things: first, a specific example of student poetic writing such as the student poems on Descartes in the preceding section and, second, possible applications to courses in your particular discipline.

> Students in pairs or small groups can exchange their poetic writings and write a response to each author. Teachers need give very little further directions except to set a time limit and mention that the purpose of the response is not to be critical, but personal and supportive.
>
> Teachers can support the above activity by selecting a poetic writing with student responses to it and sharing them with the entire class on an overhead or opaque projector, on the blackboard, or on dittoed sheets. Questions and comments can be made which increase communal (classroom) understanding of the activity. Students can also make such presentations to the class.
>
> After students have completed a poetic writing assignment, they can be asked to write a response to the experience of writing it. Students can share their responses in small groups, and the class as a whole can attempt consensus on the value of the particular assignment.
>
> Teachers can write an assignment along with the students and then share it and their thoughts and feelings about having done it.
>
> Teachers can provide students with written responses to their poetic writing from various points of view to serve different purposes: (1) teacher as fellow learner—the response is personal and seeks to point out in the student's writing areas of common interest and experience, or the thoughts and feelings it evoked; (2) teacher-student dialog—the response not only makes personal connections to the writing, but encourages further dialog by seeking more information or asking clarifying questions; and (3) teacher as instructor—this response also makes personal connections and offers advice for further study based on the experience shared in the poetic writing, perhaps an article the student might *now* be interested in reading or some suggestions of topics

for formal essays now that the student has demonstrated a personal interest.

Teachers can integrate poetic writing assignments with other reading and writing assignments to make a coherent unit on a particular subject. For example, in a history class students might be asked to write *expressively* in journals about Peter the Great, write *poetically* a short scene of Peter in disguise touring Western Europe, and write *transactionally* an essay about the Westernization of Russia under Peter's rule. Each use of language provides students with the opportunity to assess learning about Peter the Great in a distinct but significant way.

This last coordinated assignment reflects James Britton's suggestion that one kind of writing and thinking (poetic) supports expression in other kinds of language and thought (transactional). As shown in Figure 5, beginning with expressive writing as a base, the writer in

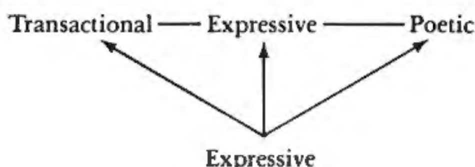

Figure 5.

composing either poetic or transactional writing can draw on the appropriate resources from his experience with the other kind of writing.[10] Thus practice and facility in writing poetically may indeed increase a writer's effectiveness in writing transactionally.

Teacher Response

In our role as evaluators we see that students differ in facility and success when writing a particular poetic assignment. Nevertheless, responding to students' poetic writing is not the time to assume the role of evaluator. Teachers can best help students increase their facility with poetic language by respecting the primary value-related purpose of the poetic, by foregoing traditional formal criticism of the writing, and by employing the variety of collaborative learning experiences outlined in the six suggestions above. By the time many students reach high school and college, the biggest obstacle to writing poetically is convincing themselves that they have some creative talent and that the teacher would like to encourage it—that there is not a hidden agenda lurking beneath the teacher's expression of good will. Many students

view *all* assignments as having only one purpose, to be graded according to a formal standard. This purpose, when practiced exclusively, inhibits the use of language for other worthwhile purposes.

Certainly teachers can expect students who wish a satisfactory or good grade in a course to participate fully in writing and discussing poetic assignments, and each teacher can make appropriate arrangements to insure that such activity is an element of a student's final evaluation for the course. But teachers should not assign a letter or numerical grade to each separate piece of poetic writing. In non-English classes poetic writing serves primarily as a learning tool rather than as an evaluation instrument. Consciously and frequently using poetic language will not make us all Shakespeares, but it will give us better opportunities for uniting theory and practice, reason and imagination, knowledge and action.

Epilogue: A Parable with Responses

A Parable

There once was a dog who barked bountifully. He barked to say hello, to silence the darkness, to express hunger, gossip with neighbors, to frighten intruders, and just to hear his own voice. His Family of Masters trained him to curtail his barking, and this made the house comfortable and peaceful. The dog was permitted to bark to say hello, to express hunger, and to frighten intruders; but never was he allowed to bark to silence the darkness, gossip with neighbors, or hear his own voice. He was fed and kept warm in exchange for obedience. Then one day many years later a rat came to the cradle in the darkness. The dog wanted to bark at the intruder, but fearing to bark in the night, the dog listened to the sounds of the feast, detached and transcendent.

The Obedient Dog
(Student Response)

This is quite an odd piece of writing. The tone of it is one of "matter of fact" and sort of unemotional. The dog is happy and free to express himself until his masters get tired of his forms of expression. They only want him as a functional dog to bark hello, to express hunger, and to frighten intruders. In a way, the dog was "threatened" not to do anything but function because he was fed and kept warm in exchange for obedience. Then when the intruder came in the darkness, the dog, being obedient, kept silent as the rat feasted.

The way the grotesque last scene is calmly and quietly portrayed catches the reader's attention to the fact that an injustice has been committed.

The first "interpretation" that came to my mind was that the creative abilities of an "abnormal" person was stifled to fit them

into the mold of society. When the time came that these creative abilities would be very useful, the person had become so conditioned to not using his abilities, that he just calmly sat back and watched the situation.

The Dog Barking
(Student Response)

Oh come on! Let's not be ridiculous! Think for a second what a dog's bark sounds like—think over, and over and over. It tends to get on the average person's nerves. Now one first reads this story he is filled with emotions. Oh that poor little doggie so inhibited—so suppressed—and the "feast in the cradle"—what a tear jerking device! This sounds like something written by a bleeding heart liberal!

This was first of all a very stupid dog to have around—he can't tell the difference between the rat and the darkness—has this dog no common sense?—It should—the author of this rubbish has given it every other human characteristic possible!

I especially like the line "He is fed and kept warm in exchange for his obedience." The author makes it sound like if the dog had only been forced to shut up with the threat of the very denial of his food and health! Listen if he wants to live there, he like everyone else in this world, better learn that there are concessions to make—rules to follow—and above all try and be considerate of others. Also the author tries to smooth over the fact that he could bark at all to say hello, express hunger, and TO FRIGHTEN INTRUDERS. What was the rat? A house guest? If I were they I'd put the worthless beast to sleep!

What poetic language does—both in the reading and the writing—is provide us with a unique perspective on experience, valuable because it allows us to place our personal interpretation in a social and cultural context, and because it allows the dominant social and cultural interpretation to be subject to personal understanding. Thus the process by which individuals and communities become interdependent is active and informed and not passive and by default. Such is the purpose and the power of the poetic function of language.

Notes

1. *Science and Human Values* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 8.

2. Nancy Martin, P. D'Arcy, B. Newton, and R. Parker, *Writing and Learning across the Curriculum 11-16* (London: Ward Lock Educational, 1976), p. 86.

3. "Language and Learning across the Curriculum," *Fforum* 2, no. 2 (1981): 94.

4. James Britton, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)* (London: Macmillan

Education, 1975). My discussion of the functions of written language is based on this book. See particularly pages 74–87.

5. *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1971), p. 89.

6. Participant and spectator are Britton's terms; for further explanation of these concepts see Britton, pp. 79–83.

7. Herbert J. Muller, "A Note on Methods of Analysis," in *The Limits of Language*, ed. Walker Gibson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), pp. 30–31.

8. Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld, *The Evolution of Physics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938), p. 33.

9. My thanks to William Sewell of Michigan Technological University for permission to describe this exercise and quote the informal paper he wrote.

10. Britton, pp. 81–83.