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Methods II

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Writing Lesson Sequence and Analysis of Student Work

“Miss Fix, we aren’t going to be writing poetry, are we?” I pause at the white board, turn to face my class with a black dry erase pen in hand, and locate Parker. I want to tell this young man, “Yes, Parker, we will be writing poetry, but I know you are going to learn and grow as a result. You will be reluctant to complete the next three writing activities, but you are going to find yourself writing poetry you never thought you were capable of producing. You will have to push yourself, but you will accomplish things beyond the goals that I have set for you.” When I make eye contact with Parker, I simply smile. This situation is not uncommon in the English classroom. Often learners, not unlike Parker, lack the motivation to complete writing assignments, find themselves intimidated by writing activities, and often lose interest in writing that they view as distant and irrelevant in relation to their own lives.

During three weeks of my student teaching experience, I led my ninth grade college level students on a journey into poetry during a *Romeo and Juliet* unit. As a teacher, I believe students should be given the opportunity to examine a masterpiece, explore its structure, language, and style, and create an original project to demonstrate their understanding of new concepts they have learned. William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is a play that explores the idea of love, including both its power to create harmony and destruction, and also the decisions this feeling can present in an individual’s

life. Most students, especially those who are younger, find Shakespeare's language to be difficult and exhausting to read. My goal for the three part writing sequence was to help learners gain a better understanding of Shakespeare's romantic language, love as a theme, and poetic techniques through their creation of a found poem, a guided portrait poem, and a sonnet.

For this writing sequence, I selected three students to represent the different ability levels within my classroom. Kyle is a reluctant reader who often appears disinterested and distracted during class. He represents the students in my classroom who have a great deal of potential for success in English, but often do not apply themselves to assignments. Casey is a female student in the classroom who often puts forth her best effort for homework assignments. She represents the students in my classroom who are quite intelligent, yet they do not devote enough of their time to larger assignments and, as a result, do not perform to their ability. Finally, David is an exceptional student who always turns in his work on time and consistently applies himself to tasks inside and outside of the classroom. David represents students in my classroom who are advanced in their academic abilities, but were not placed in honors level courses.

Assignment One: Found Poem

For the first part of the writing sequence, I asked students to create a three-line found poem from the second scene of Act II in *Romeo and Juliet*. First, each student was required to identify powerful words and phrases from this scene that captured Romeo and Juliet's love for one another. Next, each learner arranged these elements in a unique and meaningful way to provide others with insight into the passionate words of love that were

exchanged during this part of the play. This assignment encouraged students to examine Shakespeare's language more closely, and it refamiliarized students with poetic techniques that are often overlooked when the play is read aloud. Students were given the opportunity to manipulate Shakespeare's words and phrases while taking ownership over their unique arrangement and the meaning it conveys.

Prior to this lesson, the class explored the sonnet that Romeo and Juliet create when they converse with each other for the first time in Act I of the play. Our lesson focused on Shakespeare's movement from Romeo to Juliet in those lines, the length of his lines, his use of poetic techniques, and the main metaphor that guides his sonnet. The found poem activity encourages students to make connections between different forms of poetry and build their understanding of how Shakespeare utilizes a variety of poetic techniques to convey ideas of love.

I understood that this activity was reintroducing poetry writing to students, and they may feel more comfortable focusing their attention on format rather than generating ideas for content. Rather than overloading my students with the assignment of composing a small poem using their own words, I invited students to examine Shakespeare's writing and create a unique piece series of lines using his words. In this way, students approached writing poetry in a less-threatening way, and they placed more of their attention on experimenting with word choice, line length, and rhyme as they formed poems.

This small writing assignment was designed to motivate students to take a closer look at the poetry genre, and the style that one poet, William Shakespeare, uses throughout *Romeo and Juliet* to paint a tale of love and loss. Because students are using

Shakespeare's words and phrases, this also gives students confidence as they approach poetry because their focus is on conveying meaning with ideas already provided. The found poem activity provides scaffolding for students as it prepares them for generating personally meaningful words and ideas on their own in the guided portrait poem assignment.

Assignment One: Discussion of Student Work

Although the found poem assignment only required three lines of poetry from students, Kyle created five rhyming lines. It is clear that Kyle closely read the balcony scene and noted words and phrases that rhymed. In addition to locating rhyming words, Kyle placed unique fragments of lines together to create meaning. Although Kyle managed to rhyme in every line and include important lines spoken in the scene, he did not give as much attention to the flow and overall sound of his found poem. As a result, it is hard for an individual to read his found poem and walk away with a complete idea of the significance of the conversation between Romeo and Juliet that occurred in the balcony scene. On the found poem checklist evaluation, I provided Kyle with feedback mostly related to his arrangement of the lines in the found poem. I feel that this is the area in which Kyle needs to improve his performance.

In her found poem, Casey focuses on the struggles that Romeo and Juliet address about their relationship during the balcony scene. Casey's found poem reveals that she understood the obstacles that Juliet and Romeo faced as she includes words spoken by each of them. She does an excellent job at keeping nearly all of her lines the same length. Just as Kyle, Casey was able to extract different words and phrases from different locations in the scene. Casey successfully arranged parts of Shakespeare's language in a unique way to convey meaning. On her found poem evaluation sheet, I commended Casey for the excellent choices in her poem.

Although David makes high grades in school, he lacks the motivation to go beyond the minimum requirements on an English homework assignment. In his found poem, David did not exhibit creativity or meet the basic assignment requirements.

David's success in this assignment was his ability to locate an appropriate third line that flowed well with the two that preceded it. While he simply copied two consecutive lines in the play to make up the first two lines in his found poem, David managed to locate a line containing an important symbol (the rose) which he used to remind readers of the problem with Romeo and Juliet's relationship: their last names. David received comments on his inability to locate lines in three different areas of the scene. I reminded David of the importance and value of effort in informal writing assignments.

Assignment Two: Guided Portrait Poem

The second part of my writing sequence consisted of students composing guided portrait poems. This assignment, unlike the found poem, was written inside of the classroom. Students were asked to take out a blank sheet of paper and follow a list of nine directions. I began by asking students to think about someone they loved. I then asked them what word they would use to capture the feeling that this person gave them. I told them to make this their title. I proceeded to give them eight additional directions, and, with each direction, they created a new line of poetry. The guided portrait poem gave students the opportunity to explore their *own* ideas of love. Students were encouraged to reflect on an individual in their own lives who inspires them to write in a meaningful way. One of the goals of this assignment was to reintroduce poetic techniques to students by having learners incorporate them into specific lines. This writing activity also provided students with ideas for writing about someone they love. This sophisticated brainstorming will prove beneficial as they approach the sonnet assignment.

This activity moves students forward in writing poetry as they begin developing a poetry voice of their own. The guided portrait poem encourages students to reflect on how Shakespeare describes Romeo and Juliet's passionate feelings for one another, while also considering how someone in their lives inspires and moves them as they put those feelings into their own words. Learners were also asked to consider the ways that Shakespeare used alliteration and similes in *Romeo and Juliet* to generate ideas for their guided portrait poem.

I understood that this activity required students to use poetic techniques in different lines of their poems, and many learners might enter this lesson without a basic understanding of common poetic elements. Even if students can define poetic elements, they may struggle with incorporating them successfully into their own writing. With this understanding, I decided to focus on helping students practice using similes and alliteration in two lines of their guided portrait poems. In this way, I encouraged students to be creative with their lines of poetry, while I also reminded them of poetic techniques that can make their writing come alive and engage readers in a deeper way.

The guided portrait poems gave students the opportunity to reflect on feelings, memories, and events associated with a significant person in their lives. While only two of the eight lines they composed in this activity had to include poetic techniques, the other directions given for the remaining six lines may have provided students with ideas for ways to naturally include additional poetic techniques in their writing. The guided portrait poem provided scaffolding for students as it prepared them to begin writing a sonnet about someone they have strong positive feelings for in their lives. If students chose the same individual that inspired the guided portrait poem for the subject of their sonnet, they have already brainstormed and experimented with poetic techniques.

Assignment Two: Discussion of Student Work

Kyle focused diligently on the guided portrait assignment during class. I have learned that Kyle works best on assignments that he finds personally meaningful. His girlfriend, also a freshman in high school, inspired his guided portrait poem. Kyle successfully captured the comfortable essence of their relationship, while including appropriate adjectives to strengthen his ideas. On his evaluation checklist, I commented that he could expand his ideas with only a few additional words. Kyle truly put forth his best effort during this assignment, but his vocabulary could be improved. I expected Kyle to examine my feedback and remember my suggestions as he began writing a sonnet in the coming week.

Casey wrote her guided portrait in a storytelling manner to describe a memory with a girlfriend. She effectively grabbed her audience from the first humorous line. Casey used powerful descriptions, an excellent simile, and alliteration in her poem, revealing her understanding of poetic techniques. Casey's guided portrait poem also shows her advanced understanding of adjectives. I only offered a few suggestions in my feedback for Casey's poem. My goals in the feedback for her were to highlight the strong writing I observed, and also to encourage her to explore her feelings in greater detail in the upcoming sonnet.

David began his guided portrait with powerful graphic descriptions. His guided portrait engaged readers from the beginning, but his attention to detail began to fade slightly throughout the rest of the poem. Some of the content he included in his poem was ambiguous and might distract readers. He showed a strong understanding of poetic techniques as his use of alliteration and a simile were well-developed and written. My

feedback for David included suggesting he use more details to reveal how the two quotes in the poem were stated by his brother. I expected David to look at my feedback, and use even more description in his writing.

Assignment Three: Sonnet

The final part of my writing sequence required students to write an original 14-line sonnet about someone they love. Over two weeks, my students were expected to compose a specific number of lines and submit them to me periodically so that I could evaluate their understanding of the sonnet and its format conventions. I monitored student progress informally as they completed each quatrain and the final couplet. With each new stanza, I gave students examples of three Shakespearean sonnets to guide their writing.

My goals for this assignment were for students to demonstrate their understanding of the Shakespearean sonnet and its conventions by composing a unique 14-line sonnet about someone they love. Students were expected to effectively include at least two poetic techniques in their sonnets and follow the *abab cdcd efef gg* rhyme scheme. The original sonnet allowed students to experiment with different vocabulary to create a strong, clear picture for readers to consider. Finally, this assignment also gave students the opportunity to use words to convey their feelings of love for another person.

The guided portrait poem activity provided me with insight into what misconceptions students may form about the sonnet assignment, as it is similar in some of its requirements. I also approached this writing assignment with an awareness that the sonnet and its conventions are relatively new to ninth graders, especially those at the college level. I understood that writing a sonnet that presented readers with an extended metaphor may be difficult for students, so periodically I worked with students individually to celebrate the goals they had met thus far, while guiding their writing closer to meeting the remaining goals. I also understood that although some learners

would put a significant amount of effort into the sonnet assignment, their lines may not flow well, and they may not use more than one simile and one instance of alliteration in their poems. Because students have not yet participated in the poetry unit this semester, I also understood that they may have difficulty using more than two poetic techniques in their sonnet without practice in mastering a variety of poetic techniques.

Although we read *Romeo and Juliet* and examined Shakespeare's sonnets during class, I felt as though students needed to explore poetry in a deeper way by actively engaging themselves in writing. There is a special connection students make with concepts when they creatively demonstrate their understanding. While the sonnet assignment only focuses on the basic elements of the sonnet, students are still able to extend their understanding of how one writes to convey love as a theme through the development of a metaphor. In many ways, this writing assignment has prepared students for the poetry unit that they will begin at the end of this semester, as it has exposed them to rhyme scheme, iambic pentameter, metaphor, simile, alliteration, sonnet terminology, and Shakespeare's poetry.

Assignment Three: Discussion of Student Work

Kyle's sonnet demonstrated his understanding of simile, alliteration, and description. Although the lines of his sonnet were not all the same length, Kyle's language flowed rather smoothly. Kyle also revealed his knowledge of the sonnet conventions, as his "twist" was effectively introduced in line 9. As I noted on the sonnet rubric, Kyle still needs to develop his vocabulary and build his knowledge of adjectives. Although Kyle did not end his poem with two well-written lines of iambic pentameter, his effort at writing in this form was clear. I made sure that Kyle knew I appreciated his effort at iambic pentameter in my comments.

Casey's sonnet revealed her solid understanding of the sonnet and its format conventions. Her poem's rhyme scheme was strong, and she carried her metaphor throughout the poem. A "twist" was effectively introduced in line 9, meeting the Shakespearean formatting requirement, and she gave an excellent effort in her attempt at iambic pentameter in the final couplet. Casey's vocabulary in her poem, however, needs improvement. Her sonnet often repeats the same adjectives or nouns that support her metaphor, and this can distract readers. Although Casey's metaphor of her love as a favorite song is strong, she includes only one other brief poetic technique. In her comments, I drew Casey's attention to her lack of variety in vocabulary choices, while also noting the effectiveness of her "twist."

David's sonnet demonstrates a clear understanding of the sonnet and its conventions. David's utilization of more than the two required poetic techniques reveals his mastery of these concepts in his writing. His attempts at iambic pentameter were almost perfect, but he was off in the final line by a syllable, suggesting he has almost

mastered this concept as well. The vocabulary that David uses in his sonnet is incredible as it allows readers to develop a strong, clear, and complete picture of his brother. My feedback for David included a warning about heavy contraction usage in writing and praise for his unique rhyming words. I also noted the ambiguity that the last line of the poem presents to readers.

Analysis of Writing Sequence

My students began their writing sequence with a simple found poem activity. The found poems allowed me to evaluate what skills and background knowledge each student had in formatting and creating lines of poetry. This writing also allowed me to gauge students' critical reading skills and comprehension of *Romeo and Juliet*. Although my only requirements for the assignment consisted of a three-line poem formed by compiling words and phrases from the balcony scene in Act II of *Romeo and Juliet*, I was amazed at how differently my students approached this assignment. Kyle, a male student in my class who often does not apply himself and frequently acts out with his behavior, devoted considerable time to this assignment, compiled five lines of poetry, and included an internal rhyme in each line of his poem. Although he did not create a poem that flowed smoothly or formed a cohesive theme, Kyle was successful in his use of rhyme and his attention to format. Alternately, Casey, a bright, yet quiet female in my class, focused her attention on conveying the central problems that Romeo and Juliet face in their relationship in her found poem. Unlike Kyle, Casey keeps her lines relatively the same length and, as a result, her poem flows more smoothly and is easier for readers to follow. Finally, David, an introverted student with an advanced ability level in the class, did not apply himself to this assignment. Unlike Kyle and Casey who created more than the required amount of lines, David turned in the bare minimum amount of work that I expected from students. David also disregarded the found poem directions when he chose to include two consecutive lines in the poem, although he did find an appropriate and intelligent line to close his poem. While Kyle and Casey took this assignment more

seriously and applied their skills to the creation of the found poem, David's work reveals a lack of motivation and/or interest in the assignment.

For the second part of my writing sequence, students wrote an eight-line guided portrait poem. This writing assignment allowed me to evaluate students' ability to write creatively, students' understanding of poetic elements, and students' use of poetic techniques in their writing. Each student followed a series of nine directions as they wrote their guided portrait poem about someone for whom they had strong feelings. Kyle, inspired by his relationship with a girl named Sara, spent a great deal of time in class struggling to find the perfect words to describe his love for his girlfriend. Although Kyle effectively captured the essence of his relationship in the poem, his vocabulary needed improvement. Also, Kyle's lines were very short, and often a few additional words may have given more power to his words. Casey approached the guided portrait in a very different manner. She chose to write her poem describing a close girlfriend of hers. Unlike Kyle's serious, yet simple poem, Casey loaded her poem with humor, imagery, and concrete details to share a memory with readers. Casey's use of alliteration and a simile were also more advanced than Kyle's, but both students revealed their basic understanding of the poetic techniques. Finally, David wrote an honest guided portrait poem about his brother, Jason. David's advanced vocabulary is revealed in each line of the poem, but some of his lines lack clarity in relation to the rest of the poem. Unlike Casey and Kyle, David's lines do not flow to form a cohesive poem, but this could reveal that, just as his poem, David's feelings for his brother are mixed. Both Kyle and David's writing leaves readers wanting more details, as both could include more description.

David and Casey effectively grab their reader's attention with their loaded opening lines, reflecting their advanced writing ability and an acknowledgement of their audience.

Students completed the three part writing sequence with the creation of an original sonnet. The sonnet assignment provided me with the opportunity to evaluate students' understanding of the Shakespearean sonnet and its format conventions. I was also able to evaluate students' grasp of poetic techniques, iambic pentameter, and rhyme scheme as these were requirements for the sonnet. I understood that, of the three writing assignments, the sonnet would allow me to see the largest differences between my students' writing in the class. I believe that, because he was inspired by his girlfriend, Kyle was more engaged, interested, and willing to apply himself to assignments where he was given the chance to convey his feelings of love. Both the guided portrait poem and the sonnet were relevant to Kyle's life and, as a result, he produced quality writing. Kyle effectively used two poetic techniques in his sonnet, and his "twist" introduced in line 9 complicated his poem just as the Shakespearean sonnet format requires. Kyle's ability to develop a main metaphor, rhyme at the end of his lines, and effectively use iambic pentameter are areas that need improvement. Alternately, Casey, in her sonnet about a famous basketball player, develops her metaphor completely for her readers. Casey also effectively includes two poetic techniques and a "twist" in line 9 to complicate her metaphor. Unlike Kyle, Casey lacks vocabulary variety in her sonnet, and often repeats her nouns and adjectives. I believe this could reveal a problem that can occur when an individual writes about someone with whom they do not have a personal relationship. Casey's attempt at iambic pentameter is also stronger than Kyle's, reflecting a deeper understanding of the concept. Finally, David's includes at least three poetic techniques

as he describes his indifferent brother, Jason. David's sonnet clearly demonstrates his advanced understanding of the sonnet's conventions and poetic techniques. Unlike Kyle's and Casey's sonnets, David's poem provides more intimate insight into a relationship through its higher level vocabulary and word choice. However, David, like Kyle, did not develop a main metaphor in his sonnet. Readers of both sonnets are left to put together the pieces of their sonnet's subjects.

Although I began the three part writing sequence with a series of goals for my students and their writing, I did not foresee the significant growth and progress that my students have made as a result of their learning. *Romeo and Juliet* can be a challenging text for teachers to guide their students through because Shakespeare's language, in many ways, differs from the language that student are exposed to on a daily basis. When I planned my writing sequence, I designed writing assignments that supported every single student's ability level in the classroom. With each writing assignment, I decreased the level of scaffolding so that students were able to write poetry independently by the end of the sonnet assignment. During my three part writing sequence, I closely monitored the progress of three students who represent the diverse ability levels within my classroom. Personally, I found the analysis of student work to be a very rewarding experience as I discovered how far each student had come in their writing and how I could support their learning needs in the future.