

Pushing boundaries, creating new paths

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It came as a pleasant surprise when I was given the task of teaching poetry to a class in the middle sections. Teaching poetry is my passion and I was looking forward to this class eagerly. On the appointed day when I stepped into the class and announced that I was going to be their poetry teacher for the session and initiated the introduction, I was shocked to see the body language and facial expressions of the students. There was no eye contact and none of the students showed any enthusiasm to learn poetry. Their pulled up faces and yawns irritated me a lot initially, but I tried to be patient and find the reason for their lack of interest. Their reasons were not very different from the ones you are already aware of — they did not enjoy poetry, did not understand it like they did a chapter in prose, the classes were dry and poetry was boring. I was perplexed and at my wit's end as I did not know how to make the class interactive and help my students enjoy poetry.

Their feedback forced me to think at length as to how I could generate interest in poetry in my students. I had deep conversations about this with my peers and seniors and even with poetry enthusiasts I knew. After many discussions and a lot of reflection I concluded that I should first know what their learning styles are and then introduce techniques and strategies to suit the different kinds of learners.

Initially, I was skeptical about the outcome and also the amount of work I would have to do to teach a simple poetry class. But then if I wanted to spark an interest in poetry I knew I had to put in this effort.

I gave my students a questionnaire on multiple intelligence which they had to fill. From my small survey I analyzed that the class was a 'mixed group' in the true sense and there were students of almost all the intelligences. This questionnaire aroused the interest of many students as it was for the first time that they had undertaken something like this and knowing where their strengths lay was intriguing and fun for them.

The next step was to develop a pedagogy to enthuse my students into learning poetry. Upon some reflection, I realized that one single method wouldn't work here. So, I decided to apply the eclectic method of teaching. The teacher, in this approach, uses different techniques and activities from a range of language teaching approaches and methodologies.

The poem I was to first teach was 'Daffodils' by Wordsworth. I started my class by taking the students out into the garden where the plants were in full bloom. In the garden I asked my students to look around and initiated a discussion on what they observed while travelling to school every day and when they went on holidays. This led to the students talking about the beauty of

nature. I then talked to them about how nature is different in India and England. We spoke of the colder climate in England and how their landscapes are covered in snow for long periods of time. My students now understood the joy Wordsworth must have felt upon seeing the yellow daffodils after witnessing months of white snow around. His emotions are clearly captured in his poem. Now the students were ready to read the poem.

I recited the poem twice and asked the students to close their books and write down the words and phrases they remembered from the poem. This activity gave them the feel of the poem and the vocabulary. Then I asked them to recite the poem in groups. The challenge here was to keep pace with each other in the group and still recite it with proper intonation. Group recitations give all students the chance to recite the poem as it is not always possible to have each student recite the poem in the span of 45 minutes. I then asked questions about the poem to assess their understanding of the poem. My questions were designed not just to help me understand how much my students knew but to also get my students to think and understand the poem themselves. I did not make any attempt to teach the poem.

After this I divided the class into groups and asked each group to enact the poem. One group decorated the class with paper daffodils and stars before presenting the poem. Each group showcased the poem differently. One

group turned the poem into a dialogue, another enacted while reciting the poem. Over all, the presentations were stimulating and gave the students an opportunity to present their understanding of the poem to their peers.

I also asked my students to visualize the poem and draw it in their notebooks. Last but not the least, I taught them acrostic poetry and each student created their own poems.

By the end of teaching the poem I was very satisfied. My students enjoyed the class and many of them now enjoy writing poetry of their own.

As a teacher, I too gained a lot from teaching this class poetry. I learnt that instead of always treading on a beaten path, it is sometimes better to 'take the road less travelled'. This bunch of youngsters made me think and do something differently. Though the eclectic method of teaching is a well-known approach, I had used it for the first time and because this set of students pushed my boundaries and taught me to look beyond I will always cherish this class.

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