

Poetic and Visual Explorations in Pandemic Teaching

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Abstract

This article considers the experience of a literary professor working to maintain connections and creativity—as well as model pedagogy—in the context of Fall 2020. The author created invitations for undergraduate and graduate students to reflect on experiences and engage with texts/course readings, using poetic and visual choices for composing. This article includes examples of creations from this context, including mentor text work, as well as implications for creativity in online instruction.

Framework

Since 2008, the author has explored the use of visual and poetic arts in classrooms, beginning with their experiences as a middle school/grade 8 English teacher. This piece explores a series of next steps in creative, analytic response and responsive writing that students engaged with in the Fall 2020 semester, in the context of hours of online interactions in web-based conferencing platforms.

Though explored in other contexts, including India (Varma & Jafri, 2020) and Pakistan (Gul & Khilji, 2021), the notion of responsive teaching during the pandemic is still fruitful for discussion. The problem of reflecting on experience, uniting creative expression and research, and finding creativity and poetic encounters in composing, has been explored recently from a perspective that focuses on gender studies and feminist critique (Mandalaki & Daou, 2021). Writing from a vantage in chemistry education, Wilson (2020) noted the challenges and affordances of moving instruction online into a web-based platform. These moves and adaptations frame this conversation in terms of the technical skills and the needed balance between online interactions and in-person laboratory work. This range of consideration across space and throughout disciplines speaks to the overarching nature of questions of online engagements that educators from a variety of situations in life have found themselves attempting to negotiate since 2020.

For this author's courses, the adaptation of face-to-face interactions to online facilitation was guided by the questions: "What stays in the safe in face-to-face and online instruction?" and "How can teachers still facilitate learning and maintain relationships in online instruction?" These questions were central in framing online encounters, particularly as the author is a teacher of preservice and in-service teachers and wanted to frame practices in a replicable way. In partial answer to these questions, the author devoted time to checking in with students both through informal conversations and anonymous Google form surveys, to get a sense of the time students were spending online. Students reported anecdotally that much of their time was consumed with screen-based interactions; in the context of the pandemic, this was not surprising. Many students also engaged with work-based responsibilities in online platforms. Hillyer et al. (2021) have written about the difficulties and affordances of balancing virtual and in-person

instruction and composition in literacy instruction. When the screen is our safest way of encountering one another, doing work, and sustaining relationships, the result is great exposure to digital texts and ways of being/interacting.

Given the author's acknowledgment of these challenges and hopeful perspective on what could be accomplished, students were invited to explore texts and experiences through a range of methods. For example, as expanded on in this article, the author used both poetic and visual/comics-based approaches to allow students a range of ways to respond to course readings and time to step away from the screen so that responses could be composed using paper, pen, and other media. One student reported that this was the first time they had used paper in close to a year in a course. All of this work stemmed from a theoretical foundation in responsive teaching. Smith et al. (2016) have noted that characteristics of responsive teaching include a future-framed orientation as educators work to prepare and support students in the present, as well as in anticipation of challenges to come, and that the individual's path or development toward learning is at center.

Van Manen (1995) mentioned framing a "pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact to describe the improvisational pedagogical-didactical skill of instantly knowing, from moment to moment, how to deal with students in interactive teaching-learning situations" (p. 8). Certain tenets ring true for this author's approach, including the notion of future-orientation in thinking about challenges in the moment and to come, as well as the opening of multiple avenues of artistic expression to reflect on course readings. Finally, the improvisational nature of this approach, as Van Manen (1995) described, is ontologically embedded as the author did not begin the semester with this artistic and open-ended approach in mind, but adapted flexibly and in response to student experience, to shape a course that could meet students where they found themselves emotionally and physically.

This article traces both the poetic and visual/comics-oriented responses that students created in the pandemic context.

The Poetic Journey

The emotional affordances of poetry and the brevity of the form were uniquely suited to the fast-paced and uncertain nature of the Fall 2020 semester. Lahman et al. (2021) pointed to poetry as a means of processing experiences and emotions during this time, and noted the challenges that educators felt in translating work into online spaces. Hanauer (2004) has pointed to both the ubiquitous and essential nature of poetry as part of life and as part of curriculum, as well as the ways in which poetry affords personal expression, and Cahnmann (2006) suggested that, "The act of reading poetry is an underused resource for developing teachers' abilities to attend deeply to what students are saying and how they say it" (p. 347). This author's experience began with using poetic texts as read-alouds, including picture books and verse novels. *I Am Every Good Thing* (Barnes & James, 2020) and *Other Words for Home* (Warga, 2019) were two text choices that were used either as stand-alone read-alouds through a shared e-reader screen in a virtual synchronous space, or as page-based asynchronous interactions.

The author used their own work and process as a mentor text for the engagements, including the poem seen in Figure 1, which was part of a previous research project. This use of mentor text aligned with Gallagher's (2011) framing of writing, a practical step that has been part of the author's repertoire as they have travelled across a range of teaching contexts.

The Seer

A three-year vision,

swirling with **dreams,**

now compounded in a

sigh,

building **rapport,**

finding that voice

through **elements of story,**

being careful not to

miss the message,

I know I'm not alone.

Fig. 1: The author's poetic mentor text.

The poem presents unique affordances in the way it combines words from a teacher, who was part of the previous study, with the author's own phrasing that works as a literary connective tissue. Elements of the poem aligned with the author/instructor's intentions for framing course interactions in the pandemic context, including the experience of connection, the sense that individuals are not alone, though isolated physically, the elements of story that were central to course content, and even the emotional response of sighing as a normalized aspect of human response. From the mentor texts provided by literature and the author's work, students composed on paper and were encouraged to step away from the screen.

The poetic prompt, "Tell me about life right now," generated both images of toppling houses as metaphors for broken experiences and disconnections, as well as invitational reading of poetic pieces. One student posted their response anonymously on the class Padlet, seen in Figure 2. The post begins with the poet's intentions to share the piece, as well as their expression of appreciation for the use of poetry as a way of processing. The poet's note about the future again circles back to the theoretical framing of responsive teaching that the author has sought to employ, and which continues to be work that is shaped as circumstances shift.

Poem for "Life Right Now..."

Just wanted to share the poem
I wrote! (: Love writing poetry
and really does help me process

Life right now seems,
confusing.
I feel like I am wandering
around
Having so many questions
About what the future will look
like.

What future will look like for my
Students
Family
Loved ones
Friends
Myself
Professors
Those who are sick.

Fig. 2: A student poet's response, posted on Padlet.

These poetic interactions took place both within the space of the class meeting online, as well as within the engagement students wanted to practice outside of class time. Students had the opportunity to share in the class meeting, but were not required to do so; similarly, students could post their work on Padlet, but were not required to do so. Emotional processing was more important, in this case, than accountability.

The poetic text captures the uncertainty and questioning that the student experienced in stanza one, and concludes with a question about the future as a not-as-yet clear reality. This future view is explored in stanza two in relation to a range of people, including those close to the student and those who were part of the educational community, as well as general concern for those who might be sick. The use of poetry through mentor texts and invitation allowed for processing of these feelings and experiences, which were often not as easily or comfortably stated in informal class check-ins.

The use of mentor texts has been noted in teaching memoir writing, including poetic and graphic novel memoirs (Meixner, 2018). The author next turned their practice and attention to graphic novel/comics-based interactions and multimodal mentor texts.

Using Comics

The author's understanding of the multimodal power of visual and artistic texts stem from a personal history as a comics reader, as well as the work of Albers and Harste (2007), who situated visual and verbal, as well as digital, composition not as separated or binary approaches, but as a seamless range of tools and methods for reading and writing practices. This focus on the multimodal has further foundations

in the work of Jewitt et al. (2001) in their examination of how students make meaning and negotiate text through multiple modes of communication, including visual, digital, and verbal modes.

The beginning steps of multimodal memoir were shared by using *I Am Every Good Thing* (Barnes & James, 2020) as a read-aloud, pairing image and text on a digital screen. The term “multimodality,” used by scholars in the literacy field, refers to the sharing of meaning across multiple modes of communication, with each mode enabling a sense of affordance and entailing a set of designs that allow for specific communication practices. In the case of Barnes and James’s (2020) work, the poetic form of the printed page acts as one way of communicating experience and, in this case, breaking down stereotypes. The images contained in the text are juxtaposed with the words to allow for additional meaning-making through design elements like color and line. Jewitt and Kress’s (2010) work is seminal in this author’s use of multimodality, which considered both linguistic and semiotic ways of making meaning. Comics and graphic novels present these modes in a unique design that interweaves images and words as overlapped and integral features.

Once more, elements of the poetic nature of written response and the practice of writing with a mentor text, were traced through this work over the course of the semester. Figure 3 demonstrates the author’s use of a mentor text to serve as an inspiration, rather than only a guide, for student responses. The author shared this example in the meeting prior to the due date for responses.

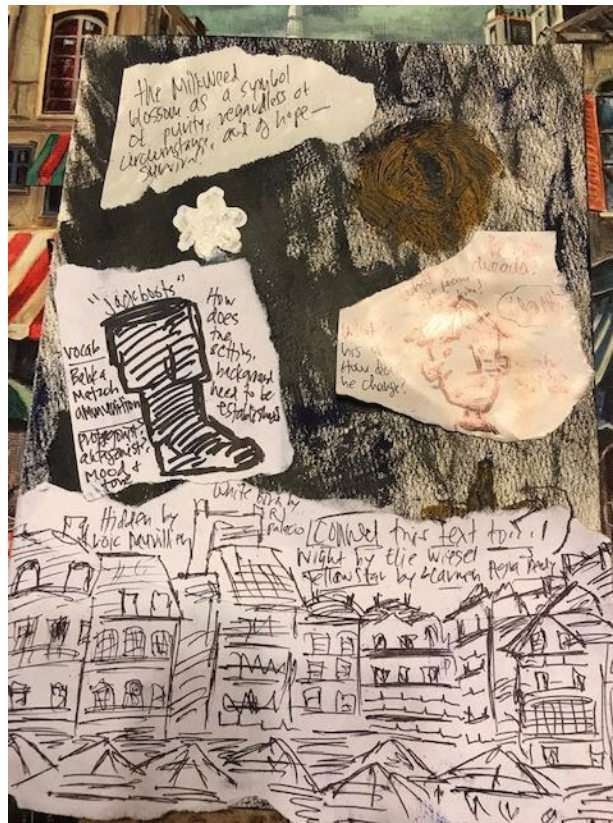


Fig. 3: Author’s multimodal mentor text.

The author composed this initial mentor text in response to the novel *Milkweed* by Spinelli (2010). One concern in this process was the difficulty of finding a range of materials for making, and so the piece was made from scrap sheets of junk mail that were laying around the house, a “canvas” which could be fashioned from a cardboard sheet, black marker, and three colors of paint (black, white, and yellow) that could be mixed to create different shades. The author sketched the image of Poland at the bottom of the canvas across the back of an unused envelope using a reference image, with notes above the cityscape about texts that might be used to connect to *Milkweed* in a text set.

The “jackboot” image above this was sketched in black marker on a mail catalog page, illustrating a vocabulary word from the novel that would lead to more conversation and exploration, and the figure of the character to the right of this image was composed on a similar page. The use of dark colors and shadows from black paint, sometimes mixed with white paint, helped to contribute to the atmosphere, while the yellow sun image, somewhat obscured, points to hope, as well as the overlaid white milkweed blossom above the jackboots scrap, which is another symbol of hope that is endemic to the book.

This use of found materials for the mentor text stemmed from the author’s thinking and the collaboration of a teaching team who noted that the raw pieces of what could be fashioned into artistic responses in the context of pandemic, or at any time, might be limited in some households. The author introduced the use of a multimodal option for making in response as a choice for the second text in the course, and carried into responding with the third text. Those readings were, respectively, *Other Words for Home* (Warga, 2019) and *New Kid* (Craft, 2019).

A range of responses were collected, and the author presents three such examples in the context of this article. They are depicted in Figures 4, 5, and 6.



Fig. 4: Sandie’s response to “Other Words for Home.”

A student composed the first response after reading the verse novel, *Other Words for Home*. The central image of Jude, the main character, takes up the foregrounded space of the image and illustrates the largest investment of coloring on the page. The character's hijab is prominent, as it is on the cover of the book. Sandie, the undergraduate student who composed this response, writes a setting, as well as elements of the story and theme, in a heart shape at the center of the character. Students shared responses through an online turn-it-in platform and students could then have the opportunity to showcase their work in our class meeting—again, this presentation to peers was not required.

Around this central image, a number of words are included, such as questions that Sandie might ask future students: “How does stepping into her identity change her P.O.V.?” and “How does her past influence her future?” Other textual renderings on the page share key terms and ideas, character names, and cultural elements of the story. Images include reflections on the dramatic/theatrical cultural elements that exist in the book as Jude becomes a figure who disrupts stereotypes about cultures as removed entities that do not overlap with the experiences of children in the United States.

Sandie's comics-inspired page does not include panels, gutters, or other features that are conventional in the medium (McCloud, 1994), but does include thought bubbles and a juxtaposition of words and images which align with this method of composition.



Fig. 4: Caitlin's response to "Other Words for Home."

In Caitlin's response, a similar juxtaposition of words and images is employed, with some differences. The composition of the page included a painted aesthetic, and word art/lettering is incorporated with the word "Big." The image of the home is central, with representations of other characters depicted in space around this image. Caitlin depicts the difficulty of negotiating language, the violence that Jude's family

members endure through the inclusion of fire, and the emotions contained in the book across the faces that the reader/viewer encounters. The image of the plane at the top of the page indicates the journey that the character would find herself on, from one side of the page to the other. A supporting character is depicted on the side of the page where Jude is traveling from. While Sandie's response leans more heavily on words with some smaller images, Caitlin's response features both in relative balance, with eight to nine images existing in juxtaposition to collected thoughts and quotes from the text.

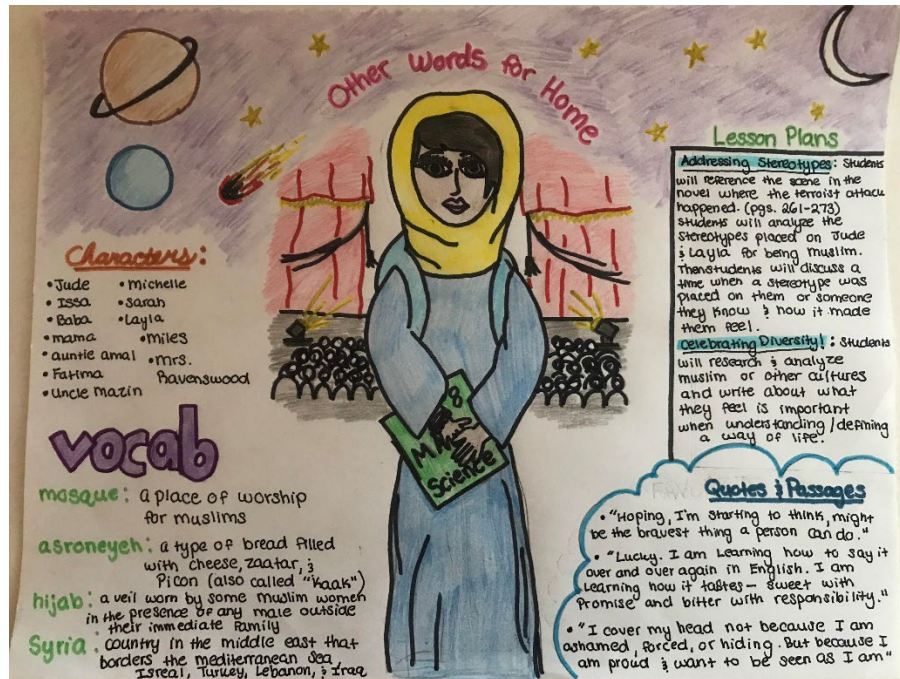


Fig. 6: Sara's response to "Other Words for Home."

Sara's response to the verse novel acts as the third and final artifact to document this dynamic of visual/verbal comics-inspired response. In this example, the artist uses color across the page in word art, with variance in word art, in order to represent the character and other aspects of the verse novel. The image that acts as the background for Jude in this depiction stems from the framing of the end of the book. The use of setting is unique in this way, as Sara depicts the clouds and skyline to frame the upper part of the image, as well as this sense of where the character might be. Jude is both centralized and showcased in this artistic response.

Sara drew upon the affordances of the graphic novel/comics medium, including word art and the use of artistic styles in lettering, as well as the overall balance of words and image to work together in composition, in order to create an almost lesson-plan-like response, which includes vocabulary, quotes from passages, and other key ideas alongside visuals. The depiction of the words themselves act with designed features in this example, setting them apart from other aspects of the page.

Discussion

In the course of this work, the author notes the dynamic of the individual instructor, processing their emotions and experiences as they simultaneously attempt to navigate groups of students through similar and different lived moments. This similarity could be found in the sense of isolation felt by teacher and student during the pandemic, while such isolation did not exist in the same way for all members of the class. For example, the author notes their connections with colleagues in virtual spaces, which at times were greater in duration and extent than in the pre-pandemic context. In all cases, students were invited to share multimodally, but could opt for a traditional typed response if they wanted.

The challenges that have come since the Fall 2020 context have included greater resistance in some spaces related to culturally relevant texts, as well as the debate over mask mandates in K-12 schools. The phenomenon of students moving back and forth between the classroom and quarantine, and the seemingly ubiquitous nature of virtual academies and hybridized solutions, are markers of this time that were less prominent in the all-online context of the Fall 2020 semester.

While each presentation retains similar features, including the centralizing of figures on responses, and the exploration of narratological details, the differences in the ways that students chose to compose proves to be of further interest. The individual style of each student could be presented in visual terms, alongside their thoughts about teaching the works. The use of symbols illustrated the elements of the readings that were resonant for individual students. A discussion-only approach to unpacking the meaning of the reading might not have facilitated such encounters with the text, and would not have given an indication of the ways in which the student envisioned the characters and world. Students were, in essence, visually displaying what the book meant to them through the use of creative methods. This working through a shared experience resonates with the poetic approach, with the initial examples drawn from life and daily concerns, before being applied to readings for material compositions in a range of styles.

Responsive teaching, from the context of this discussion, has been a useful framework for continuing engagements and seeking to make positive connections and welcoming experiences for students. A cultural and critical framing is an essential component of this approach, fostered by the increasing legislation in the United States, which would seek to limit the voices that are honored in classroom spaces, and the push-back educators might experience when using some texts or approaches.

In the iteration of responsive teaching that exists more in this author's current context and has indeed existed in educational spaces for decades, a culturally responsive and culturally sustaining framework is essential. As Ladson-Billings (1995) suggested, such an approach is an aspect of quality instruction. Further examination might focus on the ways that responses to texts can situate and even challenge assumptions of texts, including the addition of voices to the compositional world through a range of meaning-making practices and through exposure to a wider sense of where texts can be located, and how practices of writing can be honored beyond prescriptive and limited framing of literary canon.

In short, multimodal responses allowed for voices to be part of the classroom experience in ways that a singular and monolithic pathway to response might not have fostered, including explorations of identity and experience.

Final Thoughts

Meixner et al. (2019) pointed to the tendency to use multimodal texts, including graphic novels, comics, and other media, “in the classroom as a tool rather than studied as a narrative genre” (p. 495). A range of stories exists from the pandemic, as well as from the pre-pandemic routines of daily life. Comics and poetic form have been explored in this piece as textual spaces for narrative response that have included reflections on literature, emotional processes, and complicated experiences.

The work with these texts has continued into the present context in which the author is writing now, and in which instruction takes place in face-to-face, online, and hybridized settings. In a recent assignment, nearly half of the students in a class of 13 opted for a multimodal response to a text, without the prompting from the author. Were these approaches not generative, they would have been discarded after the first invitation. Rather, returning to the foundation of responsive teaching, these invitations have issued into responses that might, in fact, be part of this author’s routine moving forward into future semesters. It should be noted that these moves link to the author’s practices in the K-12 educational world, and find resonance with undergraduate and graduate learners.

As an educator working to prepare future educators, the use of poetic and multimodal texts are potential ways of creating avenues of emotional and artistic expression—as well as providing an outlet for the rich textual and storied experiences of children of all ages who have lived through and continue to process a difficult and divided time in history.

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