

## The good enough reader: Sustainable poetry in testing times

BRANDON L. SAMS

*Auburn University*

*ABSTRACT: Writing through stories of experience from my work as an English teacher educator, I problematise and offer possibilities for poetry teaching (primarily at the secondary level) in the US educational context, characterised increasingly by high-stakes testing and the practices of audit culture. Winnicott's (1971) concept of the "good enough mother" offers literature scholars and teachers an image of a "good enough reader" capable of sustaining authentic poetry reading and teaching in these standardised times. The good enough reader values aesthetic experience; provisional interpretation; and re-reading and lingering with texts that pleasure and confuse. The good enough reader serves as a partial, human response to what reading and poetry have become in a testing culture. She reminds us that we read poetry to understand private and shared life more clearly and to live more attuned to self and world.*

*KEYWORDS: Teaching literature, teaching poetry, educational reform.*

### INTRODUCTION

The following essay, in the sense of attempt or estimation, articulates the possibilities and challenges of teaching poetry in the current educational context of the United States. Dennis Sumara (1996) uses a wonderful concept to describe aesthetic reading experience that is relevant here: *laying down a path while walking*. Sumara suggests that reading the literary is valuable both for where one ends up (what one learns from reading) and the experiences one undergoes to get there (how one reads or the experience of reading). Similarly, my own essaying lays down a path while writing; it serves as an interpretive occasion for a writer and teacher who is searching for a pedagogy of poetry that sustains our desires for understanding and creating while being responsive to educational reforms that can inhibit teachers and students from a robust engagement with poetry.

In addition to the spirit of "estimation" that this work embodies, I envision this piece as "occasional" theory (Gallop, 2002, p. 5), or theorising that arises from concrete experience in the world. Patricia Stock (1993), in her work on the function of anecdote in teacher research and inquiry, writes, "[m]y argument for teacher talk, the power of anecdote, the importance of narrative in educational research rests in just these characteristics: in their very occasionality, in their very particularity" (p. 186). Instead of being "brushed aside as merely anecdotal" or devalued because of a story's "rooted[ness] in occasions," Stock finds the value of the anecdote in its resonance, teacher to teacher, of new ways of perceiving and acting in similar teacher situations (p. 186). Following this tradition, I write through story, intending to form and communicate provisional responses to questions that face teachers and teacher educators. How do we teachers and teacher educators respond to the challenges of reading, writing, and performing poetry? How do beginning teachers and teacher

educators develop confidence in teaching a genre they may have avoided in their own education?

### **BILLY COLLINS: ONE WAY IN**

The call for papers for this special issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* referenced Billy Collins's poem "Introduction to Poetry" (2001, p. 16). Collins's poem has special resonance for me, as it became a way of thinking about central tensions in my dissertation work, done some two years ago. These are questions I wrestled with at the time and still do. How can teachers do justice to the values of a literary work without falling into what Blau (2003) calls a culture of *telling*, where students are witness to the competent readings of their teachers (p. 26, 55)? How can both students and teachers "know" the text while retaining a sense of enjoyment and connection to it? How can we say things about the text without falling prey to mechanistic analysis (Blau, 2003; Smith & Wilhelm, 2010)? How do teachers provide room for students' potentially contrary interpretations when teachers bring to pedagogy their attachments to particular readings?

In my dissertation study, I wanted to understand what I was calling "pedagogical reading." When teachers read literary work to prepare to teach, what are the qualities of that experience? In what ways does the anticipated public act of teaching enrich or diminish the ostensibly private act of reading? Are students a gift to this reading or somehow a threat? During this work, one of the participants, Steven,<sup>1</sup> was teaching poetry to a college class, composed mostly of first- and second-year students. To introduce the genre, he used Collins as a form of encouragement and to help break down any barriers between his students and poetry. Alluding to Collins's lines, Steven noted,

Poetry does not have to be too serious or intellectual or stuffy. We can simply water-ski over the surface of a poem. And as for the author, we only need to wave at her or him, we do not have to know everything about her history or intentions with the poem under study.

A few moments later, Steven noted his interpretation of what Collins was suggesting about readers as they encounter poetry:

What Collins is saying is that readers of poetry have this natural urge to know exactly what the poem is about. We demand answers – even to the point of destroying the poem.

This was the first time I had ever encountered Collins's poem. What struck me even more about the scene was the way Steven taught it. He was lecturing. This wonderful irony, I later learned, stemmed from Steven's enduring and admirable sense of pedagogical duty. Many times over the course of our work together, he confessed that more "modern" (as he called it), student-centred approaches to pedagogy felt like a "cop out," a pedagogical option for teachers who lack confidence or expertise or have encountered material they cannot explain to others. "At some point, you have to tell them what *you think*."

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<sup>1</sup> All names used in this document are pseudonyms.

And so, he felt most at home “standing and delivering” the truths of the poems under study. As the keeper of content, his preparation to teach needed to be exhaustive. And it was. His notes and speaking cues were always carefully prepared ahead of time. His sense of obligation to literature and to his students led him to feel responsible for animating pedagogical space, of making the text come to life for the students (Bruns, 2011). As Steven would later acknowledge, his pedagogical version of sole authorship often kept the text and the students at arm’s length from himself and each other.

Steven and I never had the opportunity to discuss another small but important detail regarding the scene I have rendered above. As I have done and all teachers do occasionally, Steven misread the poem ever so slightly. As noted in the quotations above, not just any reader wants to “torture a confession” out of the work (Collins, 2001). Students do. And while Steven resists an obsessive mining of the text, the form of pedagogy he uses – and that we as a profession still use – positions the text for such a tortured reading (Blau, 2003; Smith & Wilhelm, 2010). When teachers position themselves – or are themselves positioned by mandates or curriculum guides – as the keepers and dispensers of knowledge, the text becomes little more than a puzzle to solve. Students either become the passive witness to the teacher’s interpretive skills (Blau, 2003) or are themselves asked to perform detailed close readings of the text, an orientation that can devolve into a myopic decoding of textual minutia or a mining for literary devices or elements (Smith & Wilhelm, 2010). Such a close focus can obscure questions of interpretation, a mode of discourse central to the humanities (Blau, 2003) and the connective tissue that binds a reader’s life world with a fictional textual world.

Collins’s poem also invites us to think about the time of reading. The time of reading in school is often an urgent present, dominated by the demands of what Hunsberger (1992) calls *outer time*. Outer time disrupts one’s immersion in the literary work and is composed of the urgencies of the real world, be it an exam, a teacher’s question, a worksheet, the classroom bell. While outer time is necessary, too much diminishes qualities of literary engagement, including the pleasures of savouring language and getting lost in textual worlds different from, yet related to, our own. In the often urgent time of school reading, as standardized exam taking and preparation consumes more class time, students feel pressure to read and digest information and literary art quickly and efficiently – to arrive at the best answer and move onto the next passage. It is a culture of quick consumption.

Illustrated by the teacher’s perspective in the Collins poem, and echoed in the work of scholars of English education (Sumara, 1996, 2002a, 2002b; Blau, 2003; Hunsberger, 1992), reading poetry is a kind of allegory for reading well and teaching well. Reading well, to use Collins’s images, is taking a poem and “hold[ing] it up to the light,” or “press[ing] an ear against its hive.” We read with our bodies as well as our minds (Grumet, 1988). We read through hesitations and mistakes (Blau, 2003). Poetry invites our return and lingering; and rewards the qualitative experience of reading itself – and who we become when reading – in addition to the take away meanings readers value (Rosenblatt, 1994). This suggests that a pedagogy of poetry must allow time for lingering and messy up; for feeling and inhabiting the textured world a poem offers. As tempting as it might be for us to tie the poem down and pronounce “what it really means,” we teachers should resist this urge and offer students opportunities to

explore the text in a time of reading that is forgiving, abundant, and, thus, generative (Collins, 2001). That requires that teachers position themselves not as keepers of secret meanings (Blau, 2003) but as midwives to students engagement with poetic text.

### **A MEASURABLE YET EMPTY POETRY**

What we want while reading a novel is to get on with it. A poem works the opposite way. It encourages slowness, urges us to savour each word. It is in poetry that the power of language is most palpably felt. (Strand, 2000, p. 47)

James, a pre-service English teacher, is nervous but eager to teach his first lesson in a public school classroom. In our conversations leading up to his lesson, I learn that he has decided to focus on the elements of poetry, such as personification, tone, and imagery. He feels confident that by focusing on the elements, students will be more prepared for end-of-year standardized assessments. As a way to test what students have learned after his lesson on poetic elements, James is planning a short assessment of his own creation, composed of multiple choice and short answer questions. As a way to teach these elements and after some deliberation, James chooses to teach one of his favourite poems, Robert Frost's "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening."

Before the lesson begins, I can tell James is a bit nervous. "This is my first lesson, so go easy on me." He smiles and asks the students to read the poem silently for a few moments before asking two students to read the poem aloud, one after the other. The students read with a sometimes awkward rhythm. They are not always sure where to pause or for how long. But James does not interrupt, choosing instead to let the words linger, however they may fall. He thanks the students for reading aloud and begins to slowly pick away at Frost's layers. He clarifies the meaning of the word "queer" in line 5. He asks about the identity of the "he" in the line "He gives his harness bells a shake" and what the perceived "mistake" might be. The students are mostly silent, though, and seem unsure of how to react and talk about this poem. James, unsure himself of how to proceed and sensing the students' drifting attention, passes out his short written assessment. As expected, it is a multiple-choice quiz that focuses on the elements of poetry. James's assessment asks students to identify the overall tone of poem; to identify uses of personification; and to identify uses of imagery.

After the quiz, James recaps the answers with the class, emphasizing the definitions of literary elements. To conclude his first lesson, after the quiz has been discussed and put away, James asks, "So, what did you all think of the poem? Did you like it?" Most of the students are transitioning to the next topic but one or two respond, albeit briefly and to the point. "Yeah."

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The pedagogical scene I have just rendered is very ordinary but it raises important issues of what the text can become (and what teachers can become through the text) in curriculums that value the epistemology of the exam. James is in the process of forming his professional identity. He wants to experience success and to appear competent in front of his students. The curriculum he has created is both his and not his. He has chosen a poem he enjoys and is familiar with. But he has also introduced

Frost into the rhythms and knowledge apparatus of testing culture. His assessment – and the lecturing that followed – focuses on what can be tested and identified. What is the tone of the work? When the horse jingles the bells, is that personification or imagery? In teaching Frost “to the test,” he has removed a measure of anxiety and uncertainty from the situation. His assessment measures what cannot be argued, an approach that preserves certainty and predictability but also prevents him and his students from entering the potentially more fruitful, but murky, territory offered by the poem – the nature of death, for example, or the function of stillness and silence in an otherwise busy life.

Thinking about the story above reminds me of Peter Taubman’s work on educational reform. In *Teaching by Numbers* (2009), he argues that teachers and educational leaders have generally capitulated to the testing apparatus of educational reform – an apparatus that strips teachers of agency and curriculum content of intellectual power – in part, because reforms signal progress, testing purports to measure knowledge, and the standardized exam mimics pedagogy’s aspiration to science. Importantly, embracing the testing apparatus potentially relieves teachers of responsibility when pedagogy fails (Taubman, 2009). When students are bored or disengaged, it is not our pedagogical imagination that has failed or is to blame, but the grim reality of testing and test preparation. The alternative to embracing the well-worn path of standardized curriculum guides or test preparation is to take intellectual risks, to engage in the “arduous and complicated work of study and discussion” with students (p. 194). Such work is not easy or certain.

If testing – and objectifying poetry – protects us it also fails to connect us to the text and to our students. James’s questions – “What did you guys think of the poem? Did you like it?” – are his attempt to connect with the students on a different register than that offered by the questions he asked and the brief explanations that ensued. Sumara’s (1996, 2002a, 2002b) work on curriculum commonplaces offers one way to conceptualize an alternative curriculum register of connection, relation, and transformation. Curriculum commonplaces, as the name suggests, are composed when students and teachers gather over shared reading of literary texts. The literary text, particularly our interpretations of and identifications with the fictional world, is the medium through which we engage with other readers. We reveal ourselves through our readings; our identities and perspectives are challenged by the difference of other readers; we come to know ourselves and the text better through textual encounters in the commonplace. The poem, the text, is the glue through which these encounters form and transform readers. The textual commonplace, importantly, is not ruled by certainty or “smoothly functioning,” standardized learning and teaching practices (Taubman, 2009, p. 195). The commonplace is inefficient, characterized by divergence, pleasure, confusion – and struggle over interpretation, value, and relevance of a particular literary work. For a commonplace to function, one must have time to mess up and mess around.

Even our most carefully planned lessons can sometimes fail to satisfy what we most want from teaching. Knowing and communicating the facts about a poem does not equal understanding and does not account for what the experience of reading a poem has to teach us. After the lesson, James expressed disappointment he could not name. I offered my reading. “You didn’t get to the end. The last two lines are the important lines. You didn’t get to talk about them.”

*And miles to go before I sleep.* How can the same line, composed of the same words, mean so differently when repeated? What is it about figurative language, rhythm, and sound that makes the penultimate line refer to literal miles and sleep and the last line to nothing less than life and death? These are the questions that James longs to ask and to venture, with students, a provisional answer.

## READERS, WRITERS AND TEACHERS: TOWARD THE GOOD ENOUGH

Winnicott's (1971) work on child development, particularly how objects mediate our separation from and connection to our caregivers, has been an important source of insight and inspiration for scholars interested how literary texts mediate identity development and self-understanding (as discussed in Atwell-Vasey, 1998; Grumet, 2006; Block, 1995; Boldt, 2009; Bruns, 2011; Wilhelm & Novak, 2011). The *good enough mother* and *transitional space* are important concepts from Winnicott that help us understand the role of play, imagination, and relationships in the formation of creativity and identity (Atwell-Vasey, 1998; Bruns, 2011; Block, 1995; Wilhelm & Novak, 2011). The good enough mother allows the child to play using transitional objects in transitional space. During play and in transitional space, objects "lose their determine force and are malleable"; for a time, those objects are taken up by the child in service of her creative imagination (Block, 1995, p. 125). Pretending a broom is a horse, for example, allows the child to act out scenes of imagination, using real objects to populate her imaginary world where they retain a new and vital function (Block, 1995, p. 125). The child's play becomes part of her ongoing world of experience, helping her shape how she sees her world and herself. Through these acts, the child fashions a sense of self in relation to the outside world. The good enough mother supports the illusions necessary to maintain the imaginary space (Block, 1995). The broom is, in fact, a horse. The transitional space and the objects that populate it receive the child's action and vision; while the objects of the world are "not-I," neither is the world completely alien or hostile to one's interests. Transitional space, through illusion, keeps alive a belief in a world that can receive our action (Block, 1995; Milner, 1990).

With intentions of cultivating a transitional space, I use a simple technology in my courses with pre-service English teachers: the daybook<sup>2</sup> (Brannon, Griffin, Haag, Iannone, Urbanski, & Woodward, 2008; Sams, 2013). The daybook is an ordinary composition book that functions as a collecting place for thinking. In my courses, we use a daybook as a storehouse for in-class writing, for responses to assigned reading, for observing and interpreting public school classrooms, for planning lessons, and for collecting our "poems of the day." My intention with using the daybook is to encourage students to write and reflect on their world, to form a provisional understanding of themselves as teachers, and to begin cultivating a sense of wise practice in the field of English education (Davis, 1997). I want it to be a "book of one's own" (as Virginia Woolf might say) yet informed by the work of others and what students see and experience in the world. Daybooks provide an open space and time for thinking. Like transitional space, daybooks help keep alive a sense that what

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<sup>2</sup> See Sams (2013) for a more complete discussion of daybook practices as implemented in a pre-service teacher education course. For a general, authoritative, overview of daybooks, see Brannon et al. (2008).

can happen in classrooms is malleable and that our creativity and intellectual vision can influence, for the better, what happens there.

In this context, I asked students to bring “poems of the day” and, each class session, one or two students are responsible for bringing a poem of their choosing. Students select favourites, a poem that confuses, or a poem they would like to teach. The only requirement is that they make enough copies for everyone, small enough so that we can paste or tape a copy into our daybooks. At semester’s end, everyone has a small archive of poems that we have read, discussed, or, on occasion, written about. Students bring a range of work and poets, including Wallace Stevens, Von Schiller, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, William Butler Yeats, Wendell Berry, William Carlos Williams, and Emily Dickinson.

When students present their poem of the day, I am both nervous and excited. I do not know what they have brought, and I do not know exactly what course our conversation will take. It is a challenge for me to let go in this way, but I am learning slowly that doing so provides space for students and their interests to appear, only adding multiplicity and difference to what otherwise might be an isolated monologue of traditional pedagogy. A few students preface their reading with a brief history of why they chose a particular poem; others explain what they perceive to be the pedagogical value of the work and how they might teach it to future students. After a student finishes reading, I sometimes ask what she notices about a particular work in terms of sound or language or ideas. What captured or captivated you? What is worth caring about in this poem? I want to let the text breathe and give students space to respond, slowly if need be, to what the poems provoke. On occasion, this means dealing with awkward silences or allowing time for one or two additional readings. I also use a technique called “pointing” that Blau describes in detail in *The Literature Workshop* (2003). Pointing helps generate interpretations about poetry that are connected to an intimate, aesthetic experience of the work.

In adapting Blau’s pointing exercise, we start with silent reading. As Blau advises, I ask students to notice during their silent reading “any lines that particularly resonate[,] amuse, offend, or surprise” (p. 125). After silent reading, one or two volunteers read the work aloud. Next, the pointing begins. Blau describes it as “literally point[ing] to and read[ing] out loud [...] a line or phrase that [strikes] as memorable or especially powerful” (p. 128). Readers find important lines that confuse or inspire or delight and re-read them aloud in a successive chain of annunciation. Students do not need to explain or provide a rationale for their choice (p. 129). They just read. As a group, we are able to hear lines of the poem re-cast, potentially numerous times, in the voices of classmates. Upon hearing the lines, however, there is no explanation or interpretation (Blau, 2003). We simply wait for the next line to be read aloud. It is a collective aesthetic experience. What the poem offers, we experience anew with every line that is re-read. As Blau suggests and we have experienced, pointing is a very powerful, communal experience, and can become a poem itself.

After pointing, students choose a line that they think is particularly important or suggestive of the poem’s meaning (p. 131). They write about that line and its relevance to the larger work for 5 minutes. When students write, they prove to themselves that they have interpretive skills independent of my expertise or another received, authoritative reading. It also shows them the importance of reading the

poem closely, of hearing it spoken, of re-experiencing the work through our bodies. Pointing and writing unites the aesthetic and the interpretive; it suggests to students that a first response to a line – whether pleasurable or confusing or delightful – is the ground that leads to convincing interpretations (Blau, 2003).

I like to think of the pointing exercise and the writing that follows as a transitional time and space. We are less concerned with reading as correctness or naming what cannot be disputed and more concerned with reading as a vital experience and interpretation as venturing and risking. As the child plays with objects infused with her imaginative vision and spirit, students infuse our class sessions with poems that are important to them; pointing allows students to bring their emotions, senses, and experience to the text under study, to enrich what might otherwise be dry, mechanical analysis with interpretations that are grounded in being a feeling, living, emotional, and rational person.

Like the teacher (the “I”) in Collins’s (2001) “Introduction to Poetry,” I want my students, future teachers themselves, to become comfortable exploring and experiencing poetry, to be the “good enough reader” that wonders about and wanders in the text. To be good enough readers, as I have suggested in this work, we need to have space and time to mess up, to have words fail us, to have understanding grow slowly during private reading or sharing with others. To return to and echo Hunsberger, the good enough reader needs less urgent structure and more forgiving time.<sup>3</sup> As seen in my own struggles, and in those I have attempted to render in this essay, doing literary pedagogy good enough means re-thinking how we think about curriculum design, instructional leadership, and about the validity of preparing students for standardized exams by enacting a pedagogy that mirrors it. The “occasions” I have rendered above speak to the challenges and possibilities of teaching poetry in the US educational context. In the spirit of anecdote, I hope these occasions resonate with the reader’s experiences being a student and/or a teacher, prompting her to (re)collect her own experience with more intentionality and possibility – for reading and teaching occasions to come.

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<sup>3</sup> See Atwell-Vasey (1998), Bruns (2011) and Wilhelm & Novak (2011) for theoretical insights indebted to Winnicott and for reading and writing pedagogy that facilitates the classrooms I am attempting to render in writing and in practice with my students.



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