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Blind Date Poetry: An Innovative Method of Introducing Poetry

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This study examined an early college high school English teacher's instructional method of introducing poetry through Blind Date Poetry. Blind Date Poetry was created by the teacher to introduce her students to 25 poems in a 90-min class session. The study was to find if the poetry introduction engaged and motivated students to learn poetry. The collected data showed that students preferred autonomy, quick decision-making, and personal interest when being introduced to poetry. Also, the instructional method increased students' engagement and motivation to learn about the poems they had chosen.

Keywords: *innovative, poetry, instruction*

Introduction

Poetry allows students to feel and see life's beauty, earth-shattering pain, wonderful diversity, and emotional awakening. High school English teachers are often the conduit to introducing poetry to adolescents. Teachers are challenged with finding ways to connect an array of poems to students. However, before teachers can enchant students with the words that will move students to their core, teachers have to introduce the lesson. When introduced to a poem, students often judge if they will enjoy the poem within minutes. Today's students want instant gratification and quick-paced interactions (Loose & Marcos, 2016). In a world of Tumblr and Snapchat, teachers must create introductions to lessons that replicate students' quick paced needs as well as make the lesson meaningful, culturally diverse, and motivating.

Purpose of Study

This study examined one early college high school English teacher's method of introducing 25 of poems to her students in one 90-min class session through Blind Date Poetry. The researcher had one specific research question: What do students think about Blind Date Poetry, an active learning poetry introduction? The study examined early college high school students' perspectives regarding the teacher's introduction of a variety of poems in one class session through the instructional implementation of Blind Date Poetry.

Literature Review

During the 1920s, Hugh Means, the originator of creative writing, changed the English curriculum to include poetry (Perrillo, 2015). By including poetry, Means modernized the English curriculum and made it relevant to students (Perrillo, 2015). Since that time, English teachers have generated creative ways to teach poetry. Teachers have designed engaging poetry lessons such as spoken-word poetry. Spoken-word poetry enhanced students' understanding of the power of poetry, fostered compassionate listening skills, promoted effective communication, and empowered students to not remain silent about struggles in life (Manning, 2016). Other teachers used technology to encourage students to visually connect with poems and required students to create visual images that represent

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the poetry in graphs, charts, or tables (Lynch, 2015). English teachers have also used digital media tools in their lessons requiring students to design digital stories to illustrate a poem's message, tone, and imagery (Emert, 2015). Teachers have combined poetry and works of art to engage students in expressing themselves and building their self-efficacy (Gulla, 2015). Many of these lessons generated active learning, which required students to become actively engaged in the learning process (Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, n.d.).

However, every great lesson must first be introduced, and as experienced teachers know, student motivation concerning a lesson is often ignited based on the introduction. Jordan created a poetry curriculum called "Poetry for the People," which provided students with collections of poems that represented the changes in society to foster interest (Jocson, 2005). The curriculum encompassed democracy, multiculturalism, and community, but it started with reading about the ground rules: the people, building trust in the community, and connecting to strangers (Jocson, 2005). Instead of starting with rules as the introduction, researchers such as Lee (1995) suggested culturally based cognitive introductions. Lee conjectured that culturally based introductions provided students the ability to connect poetry and develop problem-solving skills.

Discussion-based introductions have also been implemented by teachers to introduce poetry because they increase literacy performance across genders and ethnicity (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Somers, 1999). Poetry centers are another method teachers have used to introduce poetry because they allow all students to explore poems on their own (Somers, 1999). Introducing or creating an effective hook is a key instructional component in lesson planning because a hook engages students in the lesson right away. High school English teachers face an uphill battle in creating innovative methods to hook students into wanting to explore poetry, but teachers continue to reinvent their methods in order to create an engaging introduction.

Method

Instructional Strategy

The study examined the introduction to poetry through the implementation of Blind Date Poetry. Hardison, an African American third-year teacher in a small rural county in North Carolina, created Blind Date Poetry. She designed it to introduce her high school students to 25 poems in a 90-min class session (see Appendix A). The following information outlines the implementation of Blind Date Poetry, as it is a key component of the study.

As part of the lesson, Hardison transformed her classroom into a café. The desks were pushed together to make two-seater tables, and flowers were placed in the center. A bowl of mints was also on the desks because as Hardison said, "Poems are 'mint' to be shared, and you are dating, so you don't want your breakfast breath interrupting your date." Each table also had two or three envelopes on it, each of which had five to seven words written on it. A poem was inside each envelope, and the words on the front of envelope represent the poem's tone, subject, mood, and so on. In typical blind dates, a person is usually set up by a friend who would provide a few key facts about the other person beforehand.

Blind Date Poetry provided students 4 min to read at least two of the three poems placed on the table. Students decided which two poems to read from the keywords on the front of the envelope. Each student rated the poems they read on a handout (see Appendix B). After the students rotated to each table and read and rated at least 20 poems, they listed the top three poems that they enjoyed or connected to. The next day, Hardison gave students their poetry match, and students spent the next 2 weeks analyzing their chosen poem. The poem analysis was not a part of the current research

study, but the researcher wanted to provide a brief explanation of what students would be doing with their assigned poem after the introduction lesson.

Participants

Thirty-one 12th-grade students attending a small rural North Carolina early college high school participated in this study. An early college high school provides high school students the opportunity to prepare and take college-level courses during their high school years. The school's enrollment at the time of the study was 176 students. The total school student body demographic represented a diverse population: 67% minority, 64% female, and 76% economically disadvantaged.

All 31 participants in the study were enrolled in Hardison's 12th-grade English classes, and the participants in her classes were predominantly minority: 11 Latin American, 11 African Americans, eight Caucasian, and one Asian American. Names were not collected in this study to provide anonymity to participants.

Procedure for Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection centered on a case-study approach to determine the high school students' perception of Blind Date Poetry. The data collected demonstrated the perception of the participants in the case study regarding an introductory poetry lesson plan in high school. Data collection occurred in two ways: through classroom observation and student survey. The researcher was a nonparticipant observer of two class sessions facilitated by Hardison. The researcher, during each class session on the day of implementation, took field notes that focused on student comments while engrossed in the lesson. Students received a postsurvey (see Appendix C) at completion of the lesson on the day of observation. The survey, designed by the researcher, contained five questions rated on a 3-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *somewhat*, and 3 = *very/extremely*) and three open-ended questions to assess the student perspective of the lesson.

Data analysis of the survey occurred in two ways. The open-ended questions were coded into categories by identifying repeated comments made by the students. After the initial categorization, the researcher determined thematic categories. The Likert-scale questions responses were placed in Excel to determine participants' view concerning each question asked. Each question was a category in an Excel spreadsheet to create clear data series (see Table 1).

Each data series was averaged to provide the arithmetic mean of the students' responses. Data analysis of the field notes occurred after they were typed. The field notes were coded into categories by identifying repeated comments made by the students. After the initial categorization, the researcher determined thematic categories.

Findings

Open-Ended Questions

Student perspectives of the introduction poetry lesson were highly positive. The open-ended questions in the survey asked students what they liked about the lesson. Fourteen of the students stated they felt the introduction was fun and engaging. One student stated, "I was engaged the whole time and did not get bored at all. Time flew by and reading the different poems was very interesting! Loved today's lesson!" Four students specifically commented on the fact that they could move around the room and not just remain seated. One student stated, "It was fun since we were allowed to move around and not be seated for a whole class period." Another student stated, "Interacting and moving around made it easier to deal with the poetry." Although students enjoyed

the ability to move around, three students stated that they would have liked more time with the poems that were longer.

Although some students would have liked more time with the poems, students perceived the active learning lesson as providing a sense of ease in learning poetry. One student pointed out that "I wasn't immediately intimidated" when reading in this way because it provided five to seven words on the front of the envelope to introduce the poem. Students also liked that they did not have to analyze the poem they read immediately, and it was easier to learn poetry in this format. One English-as-a-second-language student stated, "This lesson was really helpful because I have a problems understanding English, this has helped me understand it in a different way than at normal high school." However, two students stated that they did not like the idea of blind dating poetry because, as one of them stated, the lesson was "a little excessive. Just to pick a poem to study."

Nineteen students stated they enjoyed the variety of poems. Thirteen students stated they liked the ability to find a poem that they actually wanted to study. One student pointed out appreciation that they "were allowed to pick our own poem, instead of being assigned one" they would not like. However, four students stated that a larger variety of poems should be offered, and two students did not like the themes of the poems. One of those students felt the poems were too sad, and "One of poem that I was reading I did not like because it was talking about a young 4-year-old was dead, that was really sad." The other student suggested the teacher "ask for themes students would want to do projects on." Three students stated that they did not like that the lesson only allowed them to rate their top three poems. One student disliked that another student could end up with the poem they liked: "I didn't like how other people chose the same poem as their number one pick that I could have choose. This kept me from being able to get the one I wanted."

Although some students expressed displeasure with possibly not receiving their chosen poem, several students stated they liked Blind Date Poetry because it was different from the way they had previously experienced poetry introductions. One student stated,

> I liked that we were able to connect to different types of poetry and find the kind that spoke to us. I had a "poetry notebook" project in middle school and I hated poetry because of it. This made me like it.

Another student stated,

> Most of the time, teachers just jump into poetry. We read one as a class and take the time to study it. But with the blind date we are able to choose which poem we like or dislike, which allows flexibility.

Likert Scale

The Likert scale section of the survey found students enjoyed the lesson (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Student Responses to Likert Scale Questions*

Questions	*M*	*SD*
1. Lesson helpful	2.677	0.475
2. Held attention	2.806	0.401
3. Easy to understand	2.838	0.454
4. Made me want to study poetry	2.290	0.642
5. Enjoyed lesson	2.806	0.401

The mean for Question 5 was 2.8, demonstrating students enjoyed the lesson. For Question 5, 80% of the students indicated on that they extremely enjoyed the lesson by marking a 3 on the survey, while 19% indicated they somewhat enjoyed the lesson by marking a 2 on the survey. No students indicated that they did not enjoy the lesson at all by marking a 1 for Question 5. Question 2 had a mean score of 2.8, as 80% of the students marked a 3 to identify the lesson extremely held their attention. However, the Question 4 mean score was 2.2, as 10% of the students marked 1, demonstrating the lesson did not motivate them to study poetry.

Field Notes

As students walked into the class, they expressed their excitement about the classroom layout. One student exclaimed, "This is exciting!" Although, not all of the students were excited about the lesson, as one student stated, "I don't like poetry at all" after Hardison explained they would read poems.

After Hardison explained the lesson format and instructed students to read quietly with no talking, students engaged in the lesson. However, students did make comments during the lesson. Comments initially started concerning the keywords on the envelopes. One student stated, "I don't like this one" after reading the key words, and choose a different envelope to open.

As students read their chosen poems, comments were made about their contents. Students verbally stated if they felt connected to or disliked the poem they were reading. Several students stated that they were going to cry after reading a poem, "Oh my God, I am crying. This is so sad," or "I think I found my match." After reading a poem, one student said, "A poem has never touched me that way, really. I think he is the one. I think I found my man." Another student asked, "Can you love two poems?" Hardison responded, "Yes, but that is a love triangle, and you will have to pick eventually." Other students joked around after removing a poem from the envelope. One student stated, after removing a lengthy poem from an envelope, "Wow, that's a big personality!"

Discussion

Overall, the high school students enjoyed Blind Date Poetry because it provided them autonomy, which motivated them to continue reading the poem they were able to choose. The survey results supported the student preference of self-selecting a poem to study. The ability to choose a poem is like a traditional blind date, because after a blind date, the daters decide if they would like to see one another again. The lesson's support of autonomy generated intrinsic motivation, which provided the students a voice in the classroom because they were able to choose the poem they wanted to study (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Blind Date Poetry also allowed students to connect to various poems in an enjoyable, high-speed, interactive way, as supported through the data. The lesson also provided students a different way to engage in poetry, as was evident by the English-as-a-second-language student's comment. The lesson also provided students time to process their emotions toward the poem before they evaluated and analyzed a chosen poem. The results of the data support previous research concerning student autonomy and motivation during the learning process (Diseth & Samdal, 2014; León, Núñez, & Liew, 2015), as the students rated the lesson as enjoyable due to the ability to choose from a variety of poems and the opportunity to move around. The combination of autonomy and lesson delivery fostered student motivation to want to study poetry.

Limitations and Future Studies

There were several limitations of the study. One limitation was the small sample size, and all participants attended an early college high school, which required students submit an application to attend. Students self-selected to attend the school, so they may already have intrinsic motivation to engage in lessons. Another limitation was the lack of video recording. The field notes were based on the researcher's observation at the time of the lesson verses being transcribed.

Another possible limitation could be attributed to Hardison's personality. Her method of presenting the lesson could have been a factor in the students' enjoyment of it. Hardison began the class by informing the students that they will spend 2 weeks with the poem they choose that day, "just in time for prom." Hardison also stated that like any high school romance, they would break up with their poem at the end of the unit. Also, as students read and rated their poems, Hardison played wedding-themed mood music. Hardison informed the students the music was to get "you into the mood," and one student responded, "Wow Ms. Hardison, we will only be with these poems for two-weeks. You are moving too fast!" Ms. Hardison responded back, "You are right, you have miles to go before you wed," and then the blind dating began.

In future studies, a larger pool of participants should be used, and in different classes led by different teachers. The study should also be conducted in several traditional high schools to see if Blind Date Poetry is effective with various academic levels. Further exploration concerning student motivation and autonomy when introducing poetry should also be examined. Additional lesson implementation and observations need to be conducted to determine if student motivation was connected to autonomy. Also, in future studies, a more comprehensive survey should be used and interviews of students and teachers should be conducted. Future research should also examine the themes that would motivate students to continue reading poetry.

Conclusion

High school English teachers have the task of introducing a vast amount of literature to students, and many times, it is challenging to introduce and foster continual engagement in poetry. There are numerous ways to introduce it, but some do not motivate students to continue reading. However, English teachers continue to create new methods of introducing poetry to their students, and Hardison's Blind Date Poetry is one of those effective methods. She has designed a poetry introduction lesson that fosters autonomy, quick decision-making, and personal interest by giving students a variety of poems and a choice. Hardison told her students that "Sometimes you will meet a poem, and you are like I need that bell to ring so I can move. Sometimes you will find a poem that you love."

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[Appendices follow]

Appendix A

Poetry Project-Based Learning (PBL) Assignments

Poetry PBL Assignments

#. Poem Title	1st Period	2nd Period
1. MCMXIV		
2. If		
3. Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note		
4. Annabell Lee		
5. I Remember		
6. Still I Rise		
7. Out, Out		
8. A Pity. We Were Such a Good Invention		
9. Since Feeling is First		
10. Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock		
11. A Carcass		
12. Clancy of the Overflow		
13. Suicide's Note		
14. The Guest House		
15. Hope is the thing with the feathers		
16. If thou of fortune be bereft		
17. The Journey		
18. Vincent Malloy		
19. Both Sides, Now		
20. In the Desert		
21. The Star		
22. Tonight at Noon		
23. Mid-Term Break		
24. Invictus		
25. I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud		

Note: Created by October 2015 by Monet Hardison.

Appendix B

Blind Date With a Poem

NAME:_____

Based on the outside labels, choose a poem from the table that interests you. You will have 3 minutes to get to know your poem.
Next, for ONE poem of your choosing at each table, complete the first 4 columns of the chart below. You will rate your dates AFTER you have visited all of the tables.

Table #	Poem #	So....How was it? Mark an X	2nd Date? Why or Why Not?	Rate Your Date (circle one)
1.		:) Tons of chemistry! __ :/ We're better off friends!__ :(Bye Felicia! __		1234567
2.		:) Tons of chemistry! __ :/ We're better off friends!__ :(Bye Felicia! __		1234567
3.		:) Tons of chemistry! __ :/ We're better off friends!__ :(Bye Felicia! __		1234567
4.		:) Tons of chemistry! __ :/ We're better off friends!__ :(Bye Felicia! __		1234567
5.		:) Tons of chemistry! __ :/ We're better off friends!__ :(Bye Felicia! __		1234567
6.		:) Tons of chemistry! __ :/ We're better off friends!__ :(Bye Felicia! __		1234567
7.		:) Tons of chemistry! __ :/ We're better off friends!__ :(Bye Felicia! __		1234567

Note: Created by October 2015 by Monet Hardison.

Appendix C

Blind Date Poetry: Student Evaluation

April 2016

<div align="center">

1 = *not at all* 2 = *somewhat* 3 = *very/extremely*

</div>

This lesson was helpful.	1	2	3
This lesson held my attention.	1	2	3
This lesson was easy to understand.	1	2	3
This lesson made me want to study poetry.	1	2	3
I really enjoyed this lesson.	1	2	3

What did I like about this lesson?

_____
_____
_____
_____

What did I not like about this lesson?

_____
_____
_____
_____

What could I suggest to improve this lesson?

_____
_____
_____
_____