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Funeral in the Classroom: A Failed Teaching Practice?

Nicola Blake

CUNY Guttman Community College

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New York State English Council



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The New York State English Council



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Aims

The English Record publishes original peer reviewed contributions that focus on the field of English education. *The English Record* features articles on pedagogy, essays, commentaries, program descriptions, reflective narratives, book reviews, poetry, and occasional student work. Please check the website nysecteach.org for more information.

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Cover Artist **Korryn Martin** is a senior at Olean High School who enjoys drawing in her free time. She is currently studying Program Design and Manufacturing at the Cattaraugus-Allegany BOCES Center.

The English Record is looking to expand our review panel. If you are interested in serving as a member of the review panel, please forward a letter of interest and a copy of your curriculum vitae to englishrecord@oneonta.edu

Letter from the Editor Kjersti VanSlyke-Briggs

I love that we can open this issue with some exciting news. At the November National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention, *The English Record* will receive honorable mention for the affiliate journal award. The editors would like to thank all of our authors and the manuscript review panel for their excellent work. It is because of the wonderful material we have to work with and the fabulous guidance of the review panel that *The English Record* will receive this honor. The names of these valuable contributors can be found in the table of contents and under the review panel listing in the opening pages of each journal. Thank you for your service and professionalism! The issue that was sent to the selection committee was Spring 2016 (Vol 66 No 2).

If you are interested in seeing your name in print and helping craft a great publication you can always send us manuscripts (details on how to do this are found within this journal) or you can join our review panel by emailing us at englishrecord@oneonta.edu. We are also always looking for great cover art, so feel free to send along original work to be considered for the cover as well.

Opening a new academic year with this news was a good start and I'd like to keep that momentum going. I hope you also started your school year off with good news, optimism and energy. Mine always starts to wane mid-October as the germs and stacks of papers begin to pile up. That is why the NYSEC annual conference has perfect timing. It gets me rejuvenated to hang on till winter break and then ready to start spring semester renewed. NYSEC provides other outlets to stay connected as well. In addition to the wonderful conference and our journal, we have the newsletter and our Facebook site.

**Funeral in the Classroom: A Failed
Teaching Practice?**
Nicola Blake
Guttman Community College, CUNY

Abstract

The author introduces the idea of performative annotation as a powerful teaching tool to engage students in a shared experience of reading and understanding a piece of text. Orality and performance are shared constructs that provide opportunities for students to demarcate moments in a text that resonated with them. The nature of the activity is called into question because of the deeply emotional responses students have towards the experiential learning activity of recreating a funeral in the classroom. This article assesses what went wrong with the activity and offers suggestions on how to make space for performative annotation prior to the activity being done in class.

Funeral in the Classroom: A Failed Teaching Practice?

Teaching Pedro Pietri's "Puerto Rican Obituary" — publicly read in 1969, first published in 1973 - with its rich lyricism and deeply familiar characters, has always been a good exercise in contextualizing the political and social environment of 1960s New York. I have taught this poem for many years in an early college program (grades 9-12), as well as in first semester courses at an urban community college. One of the challenges is unpacking the rich details infused in each line of the poem's 25 stanzas. Its sheer length has been problematic, not because of reading level, but because the historical and social representations require time to decipher. Pietri engages a

complex economic and political discourse through the use of his characters, one that should be presented gradually, over several classes. A mere 90 minutes will not suffice.

When preparing to teach Pietri's poem once again, I experimented with a learning pedagogy that incorporates orality and performance into a shared experience of annotating text. I envisioned students applying annotation skills to a listening activity. In response to a part of the poem read aloud, students would make a gesture to indicate a line that resonated with them. Although not disruptive, this gesture would become part of a public and immediate demarcation of an idea. Through sharing their ideas nonverbally, students would enact and model some of the annotation strategies they had practiced in writing. Once in the public arena, any student's idea or response could get built upon by others participating in the expressed gesture. In other words, students would perform the obituary, integrating the oral reading of the text with the physical signs of mourning.

"Experiential learning involves student-centered activities that involve sensory, kinesthetic and affective practices," including role-playing and dramatic reading (C. King, email memorandum, November 24, 2015). According to the Association for Experiential Education (2007-2014), "experiences... carefully chosen for their learning potential (i.e. whether they provide opportunities for students to practice and deepen emergent skills, encounter novel and unpredictable situations that support new learning, or learn from natural consequences, mistakes, and successes)," contribute importantly to the process of acquiring, consolidating, and applying new knowledge.

- Throughout the experiential learning process, the *learner is actively engaged* in posing questions, investigating,

experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and *constructing meaning*, and is challenged to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results.

- *Learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, and/or physically*, which produces a perception that the *learning task is authentic* (C. King, email memorandum, November 24, 2015, my emphasis).

I adapted these goals of experiential learning to typically static reading and annotation strategies. To understand the poem on a deeper level, to truly penetrate its layers, to actively participate as a member of its audience or its reader, students would be challenged to publicly, though nonverbally annotate each line. Through an interactive, shared, performative annotation experience, students would be encouraged to make connections between textual meaning, social and historic context, and their own lives — the type of best practices for such high-impact strategies (Kinzie 2012; Eyer 2009).

In the reading and writing sequence that preceded the “Puerto Rican Obituary” lesson I describe below, the class paid close attention to annotation as a critical skill, integral to meaning making. Students learned how to annotate text with a pen or pencil, underlining, using stars, exclamation marks, and invented symbols. They practiced making notes in the margins of texts, a skill many were never taught, or were discouraged from using because they were not permitted to write in the books issued by New York City public schools. They practiced using Post-It notepads of different sizes, where students jotted

down their notes, then stuck them on relevant pages for reference. They practiced using index cards, writing down one quote or idea, in preparation for composing “impact paragraphs” — a few sentences on the meaning of the quote or idea, training critical thinking skills. Students in the course were thus equipped with different techniques they could use across subject areas and courses and became quite accustomed to annotation as a way to enhance their reading proficiency and understanding.

Pedro Pietri's poem is literally a “Puerto Rican Obituary.” The title is key - it identifies the poem as an ode to the dead. In the words of *Life* magazine writer Marilyn Johnson, herself an obituary author, a proper obituary ought “to communicate the significance of a person, a place, an era... capture[d] with economy and grace” (Welsh 216-217). Historically, obituaries have often been read, the public utterances of a life. This was the case during under Alexander “the Great,” as with the ancient Greeks, who “composed funeral orations to honor the dead by recounting some of their deeds in life” (Bethke 62). In Britain and colonial New England, funeral elegies were printed as circulars and often attached to “the hearse carrying the deceased... [M]ourners sometimes threw these pieces into the grave” (Bethke 62). This genre's performative possibilities abound. I decided to apply annotation techniques to the “Puerto Rican Obituary,” not as a written activity, but as a performed act.

I thought of the factors common to enacting obituaries, funerary rituals, and gestures of grief and mourning. I imagined the class forming a circle and one student beginning to read the poem, followed by the next, going around in a circular motion until the poem was completed. In the center of that circle would be a symbolic burial ground for the poem's main characters: Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, and Manuel. For

each line that resonated with them, students would throw pre-crumpled balls of newspaper to represent flowers tossed in a grave. In this funerary performance, I wanted students not only to pay respect to the voiceless, but also to bear witness to and lament the characters' loss of hope and their ultimate spiral into despondency and death. The stories of Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, and Manuel represent real people who have died oppressed by their economic and political reality.

Pietri writes,

They worked

They were always on time

They were never late

They never spoke back

when they were insulted

They worked

They never took days off

that were not on the calendar

[...]

They worked

ten days a week

and were only paid for five

They worked

They worked

They worked

and they died

They died broke

They died owing

They died never knowing

what the front entrance

of the first national city bank looks like (2015 Ll 1-8,

11-22).

The repetition of the line "They worked" (Ll. 1, 14-16) and the single "They died owing" (l. 19) caused many balls of newspaper to fall into the circle at once. Clearly, these lines resonated with the students. At a New York City community college where 50 to 60% of the students are Hispanic and more than 75% received federal financial aid (Guttman Community College 2015), the fates of Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, and Manuel became deeply personal as they were read aloud. In reaching back to 1960s New York, I engaged the present day: in many of my students' communities, the inequalities Pietri's characters suffered remained virtually unchanged. Too often, students came from families living below the poverty line, in substandard housing and high-crime areas. In their neighborhoods, there were still more check-cashing places than national banks, while corner stores and fast-food establishments outnumbered fresh food markets (Neckerman et al., 2010; Freudenberg et al., 2016).

When the students read the following, crumpled papers fell in a chorus to the floor:

All died yesterday today

and will die again tomorrow

passing their bill collectors

on to the next of kin

All died

waiting for the garden of eden

to open up again

under a new management

All died

dreaming about America

waking them up in the middle of the night

screaming: Mira Mira

your name is on the winning lottery ticket

for one hundred thousand dollars

All died
 hating the grocery stores
 that sold them make-believe steak
 and bullet-proof rice and beans (Ll. 28-45).

At this point, I began to realize that I had not made allowances for generations of broken dreams. After all, “Juan/ died waiting for his number to hit/ Miguel/ died waiting for the welfare check/ to come and go and come again/ [...]/ Olga/ died waiting for a five dollar raise/ Manuel/ died waiting for his supervisor to drop dead (Pietri Ll. 63-67, 72-75). Perhaps students threw papers in the circle because they knew a Juan, a Miguel, a Milagros, an Olga, or a Manuel. Maybe what rang true for them was the tragic story of poverty and exclusion because of systematic racial, political, and socioeconomic disenfranchisement — a nation of people “born to weep/ and keep the morticians employed” (Pietri Ll. 143-144).

Were my students “born dead” to die dead, despite working toward advancement through a college education? *Could* Pietri’s poem ring so true so long after the 1960s and 70s? *Could* it be treated only as a specific moment in Nuyorican history, or was it a parallel to some of my students’ current realities? As Pietri calls the characters a racial slur, did they feel a sense of discomfort? As he rattles off an abysmal list of low-wage jobs to which these New Yorkers have been restricted then and now: lavaplatos, porters, messenger boys, factory workers, maids, stock clerks, shipping clerks, assistant mailroom assistants, assistant assistant to the assistant’s assistant, assistant lavaplatos, and automatic smiling doormen (Ll. 216-224). Did the students hear the prospects for themselves and their own community members? Pietri treats each of his characters’ deaths as a signpost of broader, cultural death — “loss of faith, disillusion, shame, resentment of

heritage, and destruction of self and community. In his most declarative tone, Pietri writes, “Here lies Juan/ Here lies Miguel/ Here lies Milagros/ Here lies Olga/ Here lies Manuel/ who died yesterday today/ and will die again tomorrow/ [...]/ Never knowing/ that they are beautiful people” (Ll. 260-266, 269-270). At this moment, all of the remaining “flowers” were thrown onto the floor, resounding as if in agreement with the profound, continual loss in the very structure of the society Pietri described.

The paper thrown during impactful lines of the poem ruptured the quiet and stillness in the air as it was read. The performative annotation activity, a sort of experiential pedagogy, effectively gave students ways to engage in a shared experience of annotation. The result was intense: the links students made between the meaning and context of the poem and that of their own lives were rich and complex, just what I wanted, though not in such a fiercely personal way. In this sense, the lesson nearly accomplished “the main unifying element of all experiential education[:] that *intentional reflection* for meaning-making is coupled with the experience” (C. King, email memorandum, November 24, 2015, my emphasis). Without a doubt, experiential learning can powerfully engage students in reading and annotation. In this case, a reading experience involving orality and performance further intensified the strong emotions the poem’s content evokes.

Herein lies the crux of this lesson’s failure: my desire to create a performative and dramatic demarcation of the poem ignored the potential implications of standing graveside in a classroom. Eager to actualize this public lament, I had not anticipated that some students would feel uncomfortable standing and performing gestures that were funerary in nature. Had I foreseen the deeply personal impact of the lesson, I

would have provided time and opportunities for the students to work through these emotions. However, the performative piece left the class raw — as students recognized how closely the stories matched some within their own circles, wounds were ripped open. The lesson failed because the class needed time and spaces to process these wounds, which I had not allotted. Although my students were likely to be personally affected by poverty, death, and despair, I believe that their reactions to the activity are more attributable to the recreation a funerary scene than to their backgrounds and circumstances. I did not account for the possibility that students had experienced the loss of a loved one and that some were in the midst of processing such a loss. In fact, since the college opened in 2012, we have already lost two students to violence — young men slain in the streets of Harlem and the Bronx. I recreated a funeral in the classroom without considering the heavy emotional weight of this rite and left very little space in the curriculum before or after the lesson to adequately digest and reflect with students on how the activity affected them.

The numerous times I have taught this poem have all been successful. This attempt failed specifically because standing in a circle around an imaginary burial ground, using symbolic flowers to pay homage to the dead, or a similarly poignant dramatization of loss, *required* a candid assessment of the climates of the classroom, the college, and the broader community. Because at least partial identification with the story or characters is expected of any reader, this should take place regardless of the demographics of the classroom where the activity is presented. At the very beginning, one of my students had remarked, “I can’t do this.” Another indicated, “I might cry.” As a class, we spoke too briefly about funerary practices and their meanings, then forged ahead. In retrospect, this was insufficient. Experiential pedagogy leads students to

experience the relationship between the context of the poem and their lives in a more authentic or complete way. The oral performance I planned revealed both the power of experiential pedagogy and the necessity of ample time to prepare for and tackle the impact of such a classroom experience. Perhaps next time, I will include sharing cultural ideas about death, incorporating stories of individual losses, and through Pietri’s heart-wrenching “Puerto Rican Obituary,” the discussion of individual deaths as representing and warning against a larger, cultural death.

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Nicola Blake, a CUNY alumna, specializes in dream theory and theories of memory and performance. Her research focuses on collaborative teaching practices and pedagogies of engagement. Nicola is currently a U.S. Fulbright Specialist (2015-2020) with internationally recognized expertise in curriculum and program development, assessment, and strategic planning.

**Will Shakespeare Make Them Smarter?
Cognitive Implications of Exposure to Nonliteral
Language in Adolescents
Cristina DeLuca Savarese
Suffolk County Community College**

Abstract

Despite trends within the English language arts curriculum that favor the literal language of “informational texts,” current brain-based research suggests that there are many cognitive benefits to reading and listening to nonliteral language, commonly found in Shakespeare’s work and other forms of poetic verse. Exposure to such language is particularly beneficial to adolescents, whose brains are undergoing neural network development for higher-level thinking, including the ability to use language for more abstract thought. Such findings about the complex processes necessary to interpret nonliteral language have profound implications for ELA curriculum design by supporting the value of rich linguistic experiences and their impact on adolescent brain development.

Will Shakespeare Make Them Smarter? Cognitive Implications of Exposure to Nonliteral Language in Adolescents

In his 1902 preface to a collection of poems written by Spanish author Marcos Zapata, neuroscientist and artist Santiago Ramón y Cajal describes poetry’s impact on the brain by explaining how such literature can stimulate neural faculties that may have otherwise been dormant. Cajal claims that, through the reading of poetry, “mental life can become integrated and full, and all brain systems can get their turn in the game” (as cited in Triarhou & Vivas, 2009, p. 83). In other words, he believes that the complexities of poetic language require a level of brain activity that both stirs and enriches the reader. However, despite this favorable evaluation, the benefits of teaching poetry to young adults is presently in doubt. With