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ABSTRACT

The blues, having been fundamental to the history and heritage of African Americans, can help kids find themselves and their cultures in the language-based activities that are part of the writing program at School #74 in Buffalo, New York. One of the chapters in the student anthology which resulted from the university/school cooperative program contains poetry written as blues, specifically 12-bar blues. Objectives of the poetry-as-blues activity were to reinforce the writing process; to provide "fun" writing without the realization that learning was present; and to show that solid and meaningful writing could and should come from what students know. During the first class session, the 12-bar blues lessons were accompanied by a handout that illustrated the structure and AAB format of the 12-bar verse. During the second session, time was split between editing and performing (with guitar accompaniment, microphone, and amplifier). Many students scrambled during the performances to revise or continue writing. The project was successful because: (1) students wrote in their own voices; (2) they were writing what they know best--themselves and their world; (3) the format of the blues poetry was successfully handled by almost all the students; and (4) the students were given a positive outlet for the attention they crave at this age level. (The handout is attached.) (SAM)

Using Blues in the Classroom: Giving Form to Feeling

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The teaching of poetry in many classrooms across America can be characterized as a symbolic tug-of-war. Teachers labor to pull students over the line in an effort to convey the rhythm and beauty of poetry, its imagery and language. Students resist. To them, poetry is esoteric, boring, difficult to understand and impossible to write. Students are fearful of what they think their teachers consider "right," and what they themselves "should" be writing to create "good" poetry.

Teachers have tried different approaches to overcome this negativity. One increasingly common method is to hook students onto poetry via music, specifically their own music. One reason is because every generation seems to find its own voice in the music and lyrics of its time. Another reason is because music and poetry are frequently interchangeable. Lyrics can be beautifully read as poetry, and poetry can be sung as emotionally as song lyrics. Many lyrics are written to resemble if not read like poetry. Integrating music and poetry is a way for teachers to make connections with students' previous knowledge and experiences.

But students rarely see or feel this connection. To them, music and poetry are separate. Most students enjoy singing or acting out favorite songs, but ask them to read a stanza of poetry and they freeze up. Knowing the importance of this connection, our program made specific use of the blues in teaching poetry. Other programs also aimed at reaching at-risk students have used the blues as well. These choices were not random or coincidental. The blues, having been fundamental to the history and heritage of African Americans, can help kids find themselves and their cultures in the language-based activities we have them do. This intersection of poetry and music can be an avenue for cultural exploration, self-discovery and hopefully greater understanding and acceptance of others.

One of the chapters in this year's compilation of student writings contains poetry written as blues, specifically twelve bar blues, based on the song "My Daddy" in *Nathaniel Talking* by Eloise Greenfield. The main character, Nathaniel, sings and raps about his family, neighborhood and understanding of life around him. This same poem had been used in the previous year's program as a "filler activity" to keep

students busy while the instructors worked with other students. Surprisingly, this "fun," non-structured activity elicited more writing from students, in terms of both quantity and quality, than any other that year.

Anticipating a similar response, we carefully considered the poetry-as-blues activity as we planned this year's English program with School 74. One objective was to reinforce the writing process they were already using, through creative writing projects. Another objective was for students to have fun writing before they realized they were learning. Our intent here was not to deceive but to avoid provoking any of the probable, negative responses associated with poetry. Thirdly, our objective was to show students that solid and meaningful writing could and should come from what they knew-- commonplace objects and everyday occurrences in their own lives.

The twelve bar blues lessons required two class sessions. During the first, students were told they would be creating poetry based upon blues music. As expected, the word "poetry" still provoked sighs and groans, but here we initiated our approach in an effort to curtail them. The students were read to from *Nathaniel Talking* and they listened several times to a recording of "My Daddy." A handout was given that illustrated the structure and three-line format of the twelve bar blues verse. (For an example, see the first verse of "My Daddy" in the handout provided.)

The format is very simple. The rhyme scheme is like a poem; the AAB format has one line repeated twice, usually as a statement or question. This couplet is followed by a connecting response, the third line. There are four beats to a bar and twelve bars/three lines to a verse or stanza. You can count all the bars by counting the twelve sets of four beats.

Students listened to other recordings of blues artists and they clapped out the beats to hear the pattern and rhythm. We then asked the students to write their own poems, on any subject that they thought would follow the pattern. Students wrote about subjects familiar to them-- family, friends, neighborhoods and social problems. Most students followed the AAB format but many, if not all, did not attempt or consider the twelve bar component. Believing that the writing and the intensity that the students put forth were more important, we did not force the twelve bar issue. If a student successfully wrote a verse, we encouraged them to write more.

During the second session, time was split between editing and performing. Dr. Dennis Mike from the University at Buffalo provided accompaniment with his guitar, microphone and amplifier. To get the students warmed up, he sang one song lyric in differe t styles (folk, funk, country, jazz, rap) to demonstrate how tempo and musical style affect mood. Students were asked to decide which style would best fit their piece when they performed.

Once the first student was brave enough to volunteer, a steady, energizing buzz developed in the classroom. All of the students got involved-- they were clapping, swaying, cheering, laughing and jumping up to be the one to perform next. Those who were too shy still asked another classmate to read their writing for them. There were the usual sets of mistakes-- misreadings, faltering voices, and voices that read too slow or too fast. Some students were barely audible, while others soaked up the attention. And yet during the whole performance, I don't believe one student ever felt laughed at that day; instead it was laughing with someone, the emotions of shared experiences. The most amazing scene of all was observing the number of students who scrambled during the performances to revise or continue writing. I didn't have the heart to reprimand them for not paying attention when, after all, they were doing just what we had wanted. It was unforgettable, a combination of good writing, sharing and celebrating.

While reflecting on our successful two-day session, we kept coming back to two questions. Why did the blues work, and what in particular did they contribute? My task was to find the answers.

Blues historians and authorities throughout time have attested to the power and beauty of the blues' format and language. From its beginnings out of the secular work songs of the African American heritage pre-dating the Civil War, to its rise in popularity as a musical style during the Harlem Renaissance, the blues have been praised for their immediacy, truthfulness and vitality. They are uniquely personal yet universal, sad and yet hopeful, simple and yet incredibly powerful. Steven C. Tracy, author of *Langston Hughes and the Blues* wrote that the blues "refers to a number of separate entities-- an emotion, a technique, a musical form and a song lyric." (Tracy, 1988, 59) It was that lyric, or verse, that noted blues historian Samuel C. Charters claimed was "the poetic brick" of the blues language (Charters, 1963, 14). Blues songwriters, because of their use of simile, metaphor, personification and double meaning, incorporated what we consider today the tools of "good writers." (Charters, 1963, 14)

The blues format (eight or twelve bars, three or four line stanzas were most common) was also important. It had been formalized in the years before World War One and it still endures today. The couplet followed by a response evolved from on-stage improvisations as singers repeated their first line to have time to think of an appropriate third and final line. Songs usually consisted of three or four verses, linked by an emotion or attitude that together told of an emotional experience or story. While simple, the form was not simplistic. It allowed tradition to combine with talent to create tremendous variations (Tracy, 1988, 79).

Throughout history this powerful combination of words, emotions and experiences known as "the blues" has had a lasting and important impact on three aspects of American life. First, most music experts agree that the blues has influenced the style and composition of almost all American music in the twentieth century, including jazz, soul, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, rap and popular music. Secondly, the blues has influenced the language and style of American poetry. African American poets such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and Leroi Jones, along with other American poets such as Carl Sandburg, t.s. eliot and William Carlos Williams, who associated themselves with the New Poetry era, all related to the blues because of its "reaction against sentimentality, didacticism, optimism and romantic escape" (Tracy, 1988, 141). Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, was the blues' influence on the African American experience in the twentieth century, its culture, heritage and formation of self-identity. The blues, in its evolution into a written musical form from a non-literate tradition of folklore and ballads, provided an essential link to the oral history of the past. The blues were readily concerned not with the separateness of the African American experience, but more so with the separateness of expression of it (Charters, 1963, 12). The struggle for the blues to achieve social acceptance by both black and white cultures is symbolic of the struggle against racism and prejudice that still exists for Americans today.

Using the blues in our program had been successful, but what kind of lasting impact could two days have? Was there evidence, for example of a similar program that incorporated similar objectives on a larger scale, to support our beliefs? I came across my answer one morning last May while watching "The Today Show" when they aired a report on a program called Blues in the Schools in Charleston, South Carolina.

The segment described a creative arts program, specializing in use of the blues, that targeted at-risk, minority, urban middle-school students. The program's objectives were to teach students not only about the blues, its style and history, but also about the meaning of the music and it's importance to African American heritage and culture. In 1993, students from four Charleston middle schools met everyday after school from 3:30 - 5:30 p.m. While working with blues professionals the students learned not only how to write, sing and perform the blues, but they also learned about blues-based art, dance and photojournalism. The Blues in the Schools year culminates with students' performances in the annual Charleston Blues Festival.

Since it started, the Blues in the Schools program has continued to expand and receive national attention. The program, which began with funding from private donations and corporate sponsorships, now includes grants from local foundations and the government.

The University at Buffalo/School 74 Partnership Project and, on a larger scale, programs like Blues in the Schools, prove that using music as an alternative approach to teaching at-risk students can be successful. The choice of using the blues by both programs was not a coincidence. As was discussed previously, the blues prove to be an integral part of the African American experience and calling upon that shared history and cultural heritage can be vital in making the connection to learning come alive for students. In addition, we noted four other factors operating in the classroom:

First, the students wrote in their own voices; they were not struggling to write how they thought they "should" be writing. They attained a temporary escape from the standard English dialect that teachers are always trying to instill in all students. The blues is a musical style that embraces the vernacular and non-standard English because of its development from an oral, non-literate tradition.

Secondly, the students were writing about what they knew best-- themselves and their world. No one told them the "right" topic and unlike other English assignments, they weren't merely reporting about someone else's writing. In fact many students wrote about current social issues and problems they encountered. The blues does not deny the validity of an experience as long as it is revealed truthfully.

Thirdly, the format of the blues poetry was successfully handled by almost all the students. The simple format allowed for great variety through different interpretations and levels of imagination and talent. Like the blues, poetry is subjective and incomparable.

Finally, the students were given a positive outlet for the attention they crave at this age level. They had the immediate experience of going from reading their writing as poetry at their desk to performing it as music and sharing it with their peers. This was not a teacher-centered activity; the focus was on the students. This fourth factor was enhanced by the microphone and its ability to transform and empower the students' voices. I liken it to the literary experience of seeing handwritten pages transformed into black and white hard copy. The words suddenly look and feel more professional, more important.

All of these factors combined in a unique way to form an educational approach that allowed us teachers to make that important connection for students between music and poetry. In time, other vital links-- from student to student, between past and present, between fun and learning, between teacher objective and student outcome-- fell into place as well. Such experiences in the classroom need to be the rule, and not the exception.

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Poems from Nathaniel Talking by Eloise Greenfield

My Daddy

my daddy sings the blues
he plays it on his old guitar
my daddy sings the blues
and he plays it on an old guitar
he plucks it on the strings
and he sings about the way things are

he sings baby, baby, baby
I love you till the day I die
he sings baby, baby, baby
I love you till the day I die
well I hope you love me back
cause you know I don't want to cry

he sings 'Thaniel, 'Thaniel, 'Thaniel
boy I love you deed I do
he sings 'Thaniel, 'Thaniel, 'Thaniel
boy I love you deed I do
well you're a mighty fine fella
and son I'm so proud of you

my daddy sings the blues
he plays it on his old guitar
yeah my daddy sings the blues
and he plays it on that old guitar
he ain't never been on TV
but to me he's a great big star

Watching the World Go By

sitting on my front steps
watching the world go by
I'm sitting on my front steps
watching the world go by
when I see all the trouble
I know life ain't no piece of pie

looking from my front steps
I can see the world go by
I'm looking from my front steps
seeing how the world goes by
when I see so much joy
I know I got to try