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Susanne L. Nobles

*Digital Promise*, susanne.nobles@gmail.com

Amy Price Azano

*Virginia Tech*, azano@vt.edu

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# Poetry is Powerful: High School Students and Pre-Service Teachers Develop Literacy Relationships Through Poetry

**Susanne Nobles**

*Digital Promise*

**Amy Price Azano**

*Virginia Polytechnic and State University*

Perhaps smart phones or other fast-paced technologies and entertainment have weakened the lure poetry once held for readers. Apparently, fewer people in the general public are reading poetry, according to the most recent Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (Ingraham, 2015). In fact, the survey found that reading poetry is only half as popular as knitting and that Google searches for poetry have steadily declined over the last ten-plus years. And while some English teachers still love rifling through their collections or imagining those boys of the *Dead Poet's Society* standing atop their desks and calling out: "O Captain! My Captain!" to their beloved Mr. Keating – others are reluctant to teach it, finding it too intimidating, esoteric, or irrelevant for adolescent readers.

Poetry can be challenging to teach and some argue it is the least well-taught part of the English curriculum (Dymoke & Hughes, 2009, p. 92). Likewise, many high school students squirm in their seats or attempt to hide under their desks at the mere mention of poetry. To address these issues and build confidence on either side of the proverbial teacher's desk, we developed a collaborative poetry unit between two classes of high school freshmen and one class of pre-service teachers. During the Fall 2014 semester, these high school and college students spent ten weeks reading, reciting, and writing poetry together as part of a collaborative research project. Throughout this collaborative poetry unit, the high school students developed their thinking and reading comprehension skills by reading, reciting, and writing poetry, and the pre-service teachers gained experience and therefore confidence in skillfully teaching the genre and providing feedback to adolescents. By building relationships around poetry, these high school freshmen and pre-service teachers developed into stronger thinkers and future teachers, and – for some – even lovers of poetry.

As the high school teacher (Susanne) and education professor (Amy) who created this unit and worked with these students and pre-service teachers for the semester, we believe strongly in the power of poetry for unlocking literacy skills and confidence in high school students. We wanted to create a poetry experience for our students that instilled in them an appreciation for poetry's power, and we knew that, to do so, we needed to address the widespread fear of poetry by students and teachers alike. We therefore centered this ten-week poetry unit on a digital collaboration in which the high school students and pre-service teachers worked together to read, analyze, recite, and write poetry. We hoped that, for the high school students, working one-on-one with mentors would support them in reading this challenging genre as well as inspire them in their reciting and writing by providing an authentic audience. Likewise, for the pre-service teachers, we hoped that working one-on-one with students to explore and experience effective poetry pedagogy before facing a full classroom of students might eliminate any fears about teaching poetry and replace those fears with preparedness for teaching the genre.

### **Setting Up the Digital Collaboration**

Susanne taught her freshmen in a high school genre survey course, and Amy taught her pre-service teachers in Teaching Adolescent Readers, a required graduate course for an English education degree and licensure program. Our classrooms were more than 200 miles apart, but that did not hinder our students from collaborating and developing the relationships that were so pivotal to the success of this unit. We used the free digital collaboration tool of [Google Sites](#) to create our shared online classroom. We made our site private to offer extra support to the students and pre-service teachers as they took the risk of sharing their interpretations and original poetry. We wanted a completely safe environment so that the relationships could thrive.

For student-mentor matching, Amy paired pre-service teachers together, and each pair mentored two or three high school students. In this way, each high school student had their own specific pair of mentors and Susanne as their classroom teacher. The pre-service teachers had Amy guiding them as a class and a peer to work with as they put into practice what they were learning about adolescent readers.

### **Unit Objectives**

We collaborated on the unit goals to ensure alignment throughout the semester, while also meeting our specific course needs. Susanne had the following objectives for her high school students, centered on the three main skill areas of reading, reciting, and writing:

- To recite a poem by memory with expression
- To read poetry with an eye for what the author is doing to create meaning
- To connect with poetry at least at the level of students finding poems they enjoy reading
- To understand that poetry is different than prose in writing expectations
- To be able to write poetry with literary techniques to intentionally create meaning
- To be able to annotate on one's own to find an author's purpose and explain it
- To submit a poem for publication

She wanted the students to experience poetry through different lenses as readers, writers, speakers, and listeners, so they could bring their own strengths to their study of the genre. In this way, she hoped to show that poetry is a living, breathing genre that welcomes any student in through the avenue that is best for that student.

Amy's objectives for her pre-service teachers were centered both on learning effective methods for teaching poetry as well as on exploring themselves as poets:

- To learn effective strategies for integrating poetry into unit / lesson planning
- To learn engaging lesson plans for teaching poetry
- To practice writing original poetry
- To provide meaningful feedback to high school writers
- To support student learning in a digital environment
- To gain practical, authentic experience as teacher candidates

Amy wanted to ensure that her preservice teachers were learning good habits as teachers, such as effective planning and providing timely feedback. However, she also stressed the importance that to teach poetry (and writing in general), teachers need to *be* poets (and writers). She wanted her students to understand through experience that to create a community where students feel comfortable and safe means to practice taking risks and being vulnerable *with* students.

### **Preparing for the Collaboration**

Sharing one's own poetry and thoughts about poetry can be intimidating. Combine this with the fact that digital collaboration, even for students who have grown up with digital tools, can also be intimidating (Boon & Sinclair, 2009; Townsend, Nail, Cheveallier, & Browning, 2013), and we knew we needed to plan for extra support for our students leading up to the collaboration. Therefore, we spent the first two weeks of the ten-week unit with the high school students and pre-service teachers exploring poetry on their own to allay fears they might have when they began the digital collaboration.

The pre-service teachers worked as readers and writers of poetry in these first two weeks. Amy created these lessons with a two-fold purpose: to develop the students' confidence with poetry and to give them pedagogical tools for when they will teach poetry in their own classrooms. The pre-service teachers started out working on understanding poetry as readers. They read and discussed three of Billy Collins' poems: "You, Reader," "Introduction to Poetry," and "Workshop." Each pre-service teacher also brought in one of their favorite poems for the class to read, a great exercise for two reasons. First, this reminded them, if they needed the reminder, that they have enjoyed reading poetry, and second, the pre-service teachers then had an anthology of much-loved poems they could use in their own teaching.

After focusing on reading, the pre-service teachers turned to writing their own poetry. They wrote three poems focused on the themes of nature, love, and color. These were guided writing exercises that they could use in their own classrooms. For example, the guided writing process for the nature poem follows:

- Draw a spectrum with two opposing ends, a sad/angry face on one end and a happy face on the other end.
- Brainstorm the people in your life who can make you feel the happiest and then people on the other end who make you feel super sad/angry. No one will see this brainstorming activity. Then, settle on one person for either end and brainstorm characteristics about that person.
- Then repeat the exercise but with elements of nature on either end - so the 'worst' (tornado, flood, avalanche, drought, etc.) and the best or your 'favorite' (a favorite tree, a season, the feeling of sand at the beach, etc.) aspects of nature. Settle on the one that most gets your attention and brainstorm characteristics.
- Now comes the “trick:” You are going to write a poem about the “thing” in nature - but really you are writing about the person from the first exercise. Personify nature in such a way that it becomes the person. Only you will know who the poem is really about, but give enough hints so the reader understands how this person makes you feel.

After exploring themselves as poets, the pre-service teachers practiced giving feedback in a supportive environment by workshopping each other’s poems. At the end of these two weeks, each pre-service teacher had one original poem that they were ready to share with their high school students.

The high school students explored all three skills prior to the collaboration: reading, reciting, and writing. First, the students read together a poem that uses a relatively evident poetic writing technique to see and study the technique in action, for example line breaks in “We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks or repetition in “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night” by Dylan Thomas. The class discussed the poem together, projecting the poem and using highlights and Word comments to mark up the text working towards a visual understanding of the meaning created by each technique then how those meanings add up.

The students then turned to recitation. Each year at Susanne’s school, all high school students participate in the national recitation competition [Poetry Out Loud](#), so this was the freshmen’s first experience with what would be a four-year journey of recitation. Susanne began by reciting a poem herself, talking to her students about her own struggles and growth working with memorizing and reciting a new poem each year. They then watched videos on the Poetry Out Loud website of winning recitations to explore how poetry recitation works. They then chose the poem they wished to recite for the Poetry Out Loud class competition.

Finally, the students turned to writing and wrote a few different poems based on poetic forms Susanne shared with them, such as an acrostic and a pantoum. Susanne wrote and shared a pantoum with her students, encouraging them as writers by writing alongside them, just as Amy was teaching her pre-service teachers to do. Susanne models and often teaches set structure poems as an effective writing strategy, finding that the structure allows students who are often stumped by poetry to approach the writing as a puzzle (that is, seeing these structures as word puzzles to solve). Students who need more support can rely on the structure and, for more adventurous writers, Susanne encourages them to break or play with the structure. At the end of these two weeks, the students had

original poems to consider sharing with their mentors plus a poem they were working on understanding for their recitations that their mentors would help them analyze.

Once the collaboration began, the high school students continued their in-class practice of reading, writing, and reciting, increasingly building the complexity of their work to share with their mentors. The pre-service teachers' in-class work turned to a focus on the teacher skills of reading students' writing in their posts on the Google Site and responding. In this way, the collaboration was an additional layer to the regular instruction of both classrooms, one that we saw made poetry personal and powerful for the students and pre-service teachers.

### **The Collaboration**

The collaboration began with the high school students writing introductions (not poetic introductions, just autobiographic introductions) to the mentors on each high school student's Google Sites page. The mentors then responded to these with their own introductions as well as with one of their original poems. We felt that the pre-service teachers being the first to share original poetry was important as modeling for the high school students who would share their own poems later in the collaboration. This also taught the pre-service teachers the importance of writing and taking risks alongside their students to show their students the value of the work they are asking them to do.

The next step was to set up their collaborative work on the high school students' Poetry Out Loud recitation choices. One of the main areas of assessment for Poetry Out Loud is showing an understanding of the poem through the recitation, a challenging task requiring both an understanding of the poem's meaning and an understanding of how to convey this meaning orally. Each student was supported by their two mentoring pre-service teachers through the steps of this work. First, high school students created a new page on their main Google Sites page and posted their poem choice for the recitation. Along with the poem, they also wrote an explanation of why they chose the poem and provided initial analysis of the poem's meaning. These new pages took some time to create, as they involved both technical skills and reading analysis by the high school students. So while the high school students were creating these pages, the pre-service teachers learned about Poetry Out Loud in their class so that they could guide their students in their preparation for the recitations.

The students and pre-service teachers then exchanged analyses and ideas back and forth for a few days, working to hone the students' understanding of the poems before they began to memorize them and practice the recitation. Here is one student's page with her layered analysis work on her poem choice:

## Not for That City

By Charlotte Mew

Not for that **city of the level sun**  
 Its **golden streets and glittering gates ablaze**—  
 The **shadeless, sleepless city of white days,**  
**White nights, or nights and days that are as one**—  
 We weary, when all is said, all thought, all done.  
**We strain our eyes beyond this dusk** to see  
 What, from the **threshold of eternity**  
 We shall step into. No, I think we shun  
 The **splendour of that everlasting glare,**  
 The **clamour of that never-ending song.**  
 And if for anything we greatly long,  
 It is for some **remote** and quiet stair  
**Which winds to silence and a space for sleep**  
**Too sound for waking and for dreams too deep.**

**imagery=green**

**Diction=blue**

**Compressed Conflict=yellow**

The author uses lots of imagery within her poem to paint a picture for the readers. Charlotte Mew wants us to be able to imagine the city in the poem, and all the hidden greatness within it. Her creative diction ties into the imagery, to create a story with more meaning. Her descriptive and out of the box word choice makes her imagery even more outstanding and vivid.

I chose this poem because of the symbolism behind all the lines. I feel like it is open to a lot of interpretation, which is something I was looking for while deciding which one I liked the best. Overall, this one seemed to flow nicely, and I feel like I will have a fun time reciting it for my first time with Poetry Out Loud.



Compressed conflict: white night

I would say my poem deals with the emotions of longing and desire. A person in-search of something just out of their grasp. When I recite my poem I think I should try to add numerous pauses, and keep it a slow, steady pace. This would add more suspense for the listeners, and make them want to know more. It would add more anticipation and intrigue.

*Figure 1.* Analysis of Recitation Poem Choice. A student explained why she chose this poem then did layers of analysis on the poem, in separate paragraphs, and in a representative image, as she built on her mentor's feedback.

After this student's initial posting of her poem (on the left in Figure 1) and why she chose it (in the upper right in Figure 1), her mentor wrote to her, using the comment feature at the bottom of Google Sites pages:

I enjoy symbolism in poetry as well. What is something you think this poem is trying to symbolize? I noticed that you highlighted the word "white night." Why do you think that's significant? I love how the speaker in this poem makes me long for this place, the city they are describing, don't you? I feel like we have all been in that place in life where we are longing for a calmer place, or a better time. I feel as though the city the speaker is describing is just beyond their reach. You are right, the interpretation is wide open. I think that's great because different readers of this poem can truly make it their own.

The student responded,

I think it's trying to symbolize the ideal place that someone is trying to reach at the end of their life. A place where everything is grand and beautiful. Or maybe it just signifies a better place; it's somewhere a person can feel at peace. I highlighted white night because it represents a form of a compressed conflict, and it's also a great form of imagery. Nights are not usually white, but when those two words are put together a whole new image pops into my mind. I also

agree with you about how I am longing to go to the place they are describing. It makes me feel even more connected to the poem. Thank you for the feedback!

Through this exchange, the student's growing understanding of her poem was clear, both its symbolism and its imagery. Looking back at Figure 1, the student further explored the sense of imagery in the bottom left. This level of discussion about a poem is often not possible for a classroom teacher to engage in with each of their students. The pre-service teachers acted as personal discussion partners for the students, allowing them to practice their reading and thinking skills much more deeply than they would have been able to in only the classroom discussions. The pre-service teachers were also practicing their teaching skills of feedback and discussion prompts with a singular audience in preparation for working with a class of students. The collaboration was already a win-win for both classrooms.

The students then took all of this work on understanding their poems and recorded practice recitations using the voice recorders on their computers or a free online tool such as [Audacity](#). They uploaded these audio files to their Google Sites pages, and the pre-service teachers listened to them and gave further feedback. This was a particularly unique part of this collaboration, as it gave the pre-service teachers real-life experience with multi-modal student work. Continuing to follow the student example in the prior paragraph, the pre-service teacher wrote in response to this student's practice recitation:

Your reading of this poem was awesome! I'm very impressed. :) I especially like the way you read the line "we weary, when all is said, all thought, all done." You did a great job of dragging out the line and emphasizing the repetition of "all." The only suggestion I have to make it better is in the last three lines. Right now you pause at the end of each line but there is no punctuation there. Since it is a whole three lines without punctuation, you obviously need to stop to breathe somewhere but maybe make them shorter pauses? Like, try to make the lines flow together more. But other than that, I thought it was really great, hearing you read the poem really helped it come alive to me. Great job!

The student responded:

Thank you for the feedback! I'll definitely try and fix my pauses toward the end. We did a practice recitation today with a partner and it finally all came together. I have fully memorized my poem so I'm confident in that area, but inflection is something I need to work on. I am also aware that saying it in front of more people will bring on some more nerves that I haven't felt yet, so I will try to practice as much as possible this weekend. I also plan on adding some hand gestures to make it more appealing for the audience.

In this exchange, the ongoing practice and fine-tuning of the student's recitation through the individual support of the pre-service teachers are clear. Susanne was having the



students practice their recitations in class, as this student noted, but she could not work as closely with each student as the pre-service teachers were able to do.

Once the exchange about the recitations was completed, the mentors then suggested new poems for the students to read that they felt the students, in what they had learned about them in their work together, would enjoy. The reason for this step was twofold. First, we wanted poetry reading to become a personal exchange for the students and pre-service teachers, a personal exchange that inspired even more interest in reading poetry. Amy found that her pre-service teachers were excited to recommend poems to their students, and Susanne saw how excited her students were to read these personal recommendations. Susanne had planned for this to be a homework assignment, but as soon as they saw the recommendations in class, they went online and found the poems so they could read them right away. Second, the high school students' next task was to choose a poem for which they make a full multi-modal analysis video, and Susanne wanted them to consider poems they might not have already known. In the end, many of them did choose the poems their mentors had suggested. This video project (see Figure 2) was the final assessment of the students' reading and reciting skills.

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**Goal:** to bring together all of the skills you have been working on into a masterpiece of poetic

Understanding

**Requirements:**

- **Written Analysis:** On a new page on your Google Site,
  - Put your poem with title and author
  - Highlight on your poem where you see 4 different poetry master techniques occurring (choose any but tone from our list). For each of these 4 places:
    - Name the master technique
    - Define the master technique
    - In 3+ sentences, explain how this technique creates or adds meaning in this poem.
  - Write 2 paragraphs that present and support what you feel is the overall tone of your poem.
- **Video Presentation:** Post this on the same page as the written analysis.
  - Length: as long as it takes you to recite the poem plus 10 seconds or less of additional time
  - Elements:
    - Your poem recitation
    - 10 or more still images
    - Credit page listing poem title and author, your name, and image/audio sources
  - Other Ideas:
    - Caption your Text
    - Cut and spread out recitation audio
    - Music layer
    - Original still drawings or animation
    - The sky's the limit!

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*Figure 2. Guidelines for Video Project.*

The students worked with their pre-service teachers to analyze the poems they chose for their videos in the same way they had done for their Poetry Out Loud poems, dialoguing about their analyses in the comment feature of the Google Sites page. The students then recorded themselves reciting the poems to convey their understanding of the poems' meanings and used these recordings as the audio for a series of images that capture the meaning visually. The pre-service teachers viewed these multi-modal presentations, now practicing giving feedback on a major multi-modal assessment.

The final step in the collaboration was the high school students sharing three of their original poems with their pre-service teachers as their final writing assessment. We made this the last step because, as we wrote above, sharing one's own writing is often the scariest step for high school students, as they often do not have audiences beyond their teacher. We hoped that the many weeks they had spent working with their pre-service

teachers would make them much more relaxed, and maybe even excited, to share their writing with them. The pre-service teachers then commented on these poems, specifically practicing giving feedback on writing style choices by identifying poetic techniques they saw the students using. The high school students revised their poems using this feedback.

As the collaboration was concluding, the pre-service teachers wrote final feedback comments on the revised poems and suggested one more poem for each of their students to read, and both the students and pre-service teachers wrote final goodbye comments. We can both attest to the sense of sadness in our classrooms as the collaborative work was coming to an end, as both the high school students and pre-service teachers had become truly invested in a relationship across 200+ miles focused on the power of poetry.

### **Final Reflections**

Perhaps the general audience for poetry has diminished over time, but we believe this collaboration had a positive influence on the students and pre-service teachers in our classrooms. One of the high school students shared, "I actually really enjoyed this unit, and when it started I was a little concerned. Working with our college partners really helped, and I am actually looking forward to the next time that we study poetry." Comments like this one, shared formally and informally over the period of our collaboration, indicated significant gains for both groups. In the high school students' final reflections on the unit, they articulated the powerful learning that had happened for them. First, they saw the cognitive effects of collaborating with an authentic audience:

More than one person's opinion helped me see what people understood and what they did and did not like. It is like when you take a survey and the more people who are asked the more correct the survey is. So the more ideas and opinions I get help my poetry get better.

They saw that this broader perspective was supported by the close relationship they developed with their pre-service teachers:

I think that when you are learning something that can be interpreted and viewed many different ways, such as poetry, then the more mentors and teachers you have the better. It's just like getting both sides of the story, and having both you [Susanne] and a mentor just gives us students that many more opinions, views, and advice on poems. So I think the mentors really helped, especially since they had certain students and could really help those individuals work through others' poems and poems of their own.

These multiple viewpoints allowed students to develop a relationship with poetry that encouraged personal interpretation. Rather than teaching poetry in an environment with "right or wrong" answers, these students and pre-service teachers took on the task of *real* poets who wrote and thought about poetry, discussed what poems might mean, gave feedback, rewrote, thought some more, and so on. Students in both classrooms looked forward to the time they were able to work together in this digital space.

We believe this collaboration helped the high school students develop stronger literacy skills by practicing the reading, writing, and reciting of poetry in a nonthreatening space. The best example of this was the ways in which they incorporated their mentors' feedback into their revised work. Similarly, the pre-service teachers learned invaluable and effective literacy pedagogy as a result of this collaboration. They experienced the power of sharing and reading poetry with adolescents and the value of meaningful and timely feedback for anxious teenagers trusting them with their words.

Who knows if these students will ever read Walt Whitman for pure enjoyment. But, for us, this collaboration was in a sense an "Oh Captain! My Captain" experience. We not only stood witness to our students' literacy and pedagogical gains but also to the simple fact that these high school students and pre-service teachers had poetry in their lives every day for ten weeks. As Mr. Keating says in *Dead Poet's Society*, "We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion." We believe our students are richer for having shared that passion, a lesson that goes far beyond the measurement of literacy and pedagogy.

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### About the Authors

*Susanne Nobles* works with both Digital Promise and Digital Promise Global. Her focus is identifying and communicating the best learning and instructional strategies for learners of all ages and all learning differences. Prior to Digital Promise, Susanne was a teacher and administrator, leading and advising 1:1 programs at middle, secondary, and collegiate levels as well as teaching English and advising yearbook staffs. She earned her Ph.D. in Composition and New Media from Old Dominion University, focusing her research on creating effective digital communities of practice.

*Dr. Amy Price Azano* is an Assistant Professor of Adolescent Literacy in the School of Education at Virginia Tech. Her scholarship focuses on rural literacies, place-based pedagogy, and the literacy needs of special populations. She is the co-Principal Investigator of *Promoting PLACE (Place, Literacy, Achievement, Community, and Engagement) in Rural Schools*, a five-year, 1.9 million dollar U.S. Department of Education grant designed to support gifted education programs in high-poverty rural communities. Dr. Azano has several book chapters, a newly released curriculum series with Prufrock Press, regularly publishes in national and international peer-reviewed journals, and has served as a keynote speaker on rural topics in the U.S. and abroad.