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Reflection on Unit, "No Prisoner Be": Exploring Freedom and Limitation in the work of Emily Dickinson

Overview

So much has been made of and speculated about the tight, restrictive spaces in Dickinson's life and in her poetry, and yet she has endured through time because she takes her readers to vast and infinite places. This is her magic and her genius, and this is the way in which I wished to introduce her to my students.

Approach

While there are many ways to approach a study of Dickinson, I think it most effective when students can plunge into the creative process. This unit allowed students to be detectives, critics, and poets at once. Much responsibility was placed on them to make sense of what they were apprehending. They loved it, and so did I!

Topic

As colleagues pointed out when I conceived of this unit during the NEH program in Summer '09, the freedom/restriction topic is particularly appealing to teenagers. I found this to be the case when I read the thoughtful initial reflections from students: they loved entering into the unit by considering their own experiences. Even though this is an engaging topic, any topic close to the teacher would work, I think, as long as she/he is enthusiastic about it.

Technical Matters

Having laptop carts and a portable LCD projector in the classroom helped, so that I could demonstrate navigating sites and students could take advantage of the laptops' portability from group to group. A computer lab format could work, too. Without technology, a teacher could simply provide students with a list of the first lines of selected poems and have students research the ones that appeal. The less access to materials, the more the teacher will have to narrow the focus to provide necessary resources.

Introductory Lessons

It was particularly rewarding to use the Emily Dickinson Museum site, as when we as a class read through the "Characteristics" section while it was on the overhead projector. We practiced first the "Tips for Reading" and then had a discussion with the poem in front of us.

Word and Poem Search

The Lexicon/PAL search and find was fun for them, but the paraphrase, predictably, was difficult. My idea was not to have them create a perfect piece, but rather to play as with a puzzle at trying to approximate what Dickinson was saying.

Analytical Piece

The one portion of the assignment that I think needs more attention is the poetry analysis. Individual expression seemed to recede as students moved into "analytical" mode. Their efforts were admirable, and they made valuable observations in this more formal exercise; however, I still need to think about how to ensure that students continue, while analyzing, to hear and employ their important individual voices. This is something that I will address in future, not just in the Dickinson unit, but in my continued work with student writing.

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Original Poem Activity and Response

The final poem was fun for most; initially, I was going to keep students within the topic (freedom/restriction) as they wrote their own poems, but I asked them and they nixed that idea immediately. We agreed that their "restriction" would be to write in Dickinson's form/style/voice and their "freedom" would be the topic they chose. I have included some examples; the students really invested themselves in this piece.

In practice, I had students type up their responses to creating the poem as part of that homework assignment. Here, I've separated the two pieces of writing, leaving their response to an in-class journal write the next day. I think that might work better; it certainly will give students more time to craft a poem. I'd also like to emphasize that certainly these poems are exercises, experiments, drafts: as a creative writing teacher, too, I know that students sometimes tend to think "one and done," for a poem. I often need to point out to them that Mary Oliver, for example, goes through forty or fifty versions! (Oliver 111)

Essential Questions and Beyond

Emphasizing the Essential Questions at the beginning, returning to them throughout the Unit, and revisiting them at the end is important. We thought about the questions in authentic ways, and students appreciated being able to demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways. I loved that I could share my enthusiasm about Emily Dickinson with them. I am grateful for the opportunity, especially because their interaction with the poet has left them with the knowledge and the tools to return to her and her genius whenever they choose.

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