wasatch range writing project
by Paula Simonson

Lesson Title: Put that on the List: Collaboratively Writing a Catalog Poem

Burning Question: Can categorizing items and generating lists collaboratively teach specific skills to developing writers across curriculum? Can the creation of poetry from a list bring confidence to developing writers while creating connections to background knowledge?

Objectives: Students will

- examine the design of the catalog/list poem
- consider the characteristics of contemporary poetry
- develop awareness of the subtleties in language
- learn to collaborate with others in creative and problem solving strategies
- students will create a meaningful piece of poetry through brainstorming and collaboration
- students will develop background knowledge on well known poets and poetry

Materials: You will need

- Copies of "Fear" in *All of Us* by Raymond Carver
- White Board and Markers
- Paper
- Pencils/Pens
- Emotion Catalog Poem Checklist (can be modified to fit specific topic or need)
- Reflection Sheet (can be used to self assessment at the end of the lesson)

Time Span: Three to Five 45 minute sessions (depending on group and ability level)

Procedures:

Pre-Activity: Ask students to look through pockets or backpacks for an item they would be willing to place on a desk or table along with items from others in the class. Then ask students to see how many different ways these items could be categorized. (color, size, shape, function, etc.)

Session One

1. Begin by asking students why we make lists. Possible responses will likely include the following: to remember things, to categorize things, to highlight important things, to itemize or number—and to avoid having to write a lot!
2. Ask students to brainstorm types of lists (e.g., grocery lists, to-do lists, wish lists, Christmas lists to Santa, class roster lists, homework lists, mailing lists, waiting lists, guest lists, even David Letterman's "Top Ten" lists).
3. Ask students to consider how we compose lists (i.e., by order of importance, chronologically, through linkage of ideas, etc.).

4. Focus discussion on why the design of a list is such a contemporary form. Students will likely note that ours is a fast-paced society, and we're driven to shorten, speed up, and do everything quickly. (Note: Classes who are studying the minimalist style of writing can make a strong connection here.)
5. Ask students to enumerate a class list of "human emotions." Record their responses on the board or on chart paper. Encourage students to move beyond the most obvious (i.e., happiness, sadness, fear, jealousy, etc.) toward some that are more complex (i.e., guilt, frustration, pride). Allow students to share comments about these emotions as they are listed because this conversation will help to spur ideas for the next part of the activity.
6. When students have compiled a lengthy list, ask the class to choose six to eight of the emotions. Write each of the emotions at the top of separate piece of paper and circulate the papers around the room, asking students to add their own more specific ideas to the list of emotions. If students have trouble getting started, you can share some examples—Confusion about growing up, pride in being class president, boredom with first period Spanish, satisfaction with a hot fudge sundae.
7. When the papers have finished circulating, ask students to read each list aloud, and then let the class pick the four or five (depending on the size of the class) lists they like best to use in creating their group poems.
8. Break the class into groups of four or five, and give each group a different list.
9. Ask each group to read through the material in the class-generated lists and highlight those ideas they like. They should then come up with additional lines and phrases that fit with the emotion.
10. Tell students that they will use this material in the next class session to collaborate on a group poem.

Session Two

1. In this second class session, introduce students to the design of the list/catalog poem and give students the opportunity to write such poems.
2. Begin by reading Raymond Carver's poem "Fear," a list poem in which the author enumerates the fears he confronts, among them, fear of dogs and late night telephone calls, fear of poverty and of the police, and ultimately fear of death.
3. Ask students to point out their favorite lines and discuss why these are their favorites.
4. Guide students to recognize that the cool, stripped-down structure of the poem is in sharp contrast to the intense emotion it expresses.
5. Ask students to reflect on why the poet chose to list things in the order that he did, and help them focus on the importance of word choice and on the use of phrasing in order to establish a rhythm that makes the poem flow. Emphasize especially the ending, the line that offers a "twist" which breaks the pattern and the rhythm, and, in doing so, establishes the heart of the poem.
6. At this point, you may want to discuss aspects of Carver's life that inspired lines in the poem. This discussion can help students reach into their own experience for powerful ideas to include in their own poems.
7. After the discussion of "Fear," ask students to return to the groups they established in the previous class to begin creating their own list poems based on the "emotion list" each group was working with.
8. Point out to students that although this writing might seem easy at first, as easy as compiling a grocery list, they need to do two important things:
    - Decide on a plan, a rationale for the organization of the poem.
    - Work hard to choose just the right words because the poem is composed of so few words.
9. Offer as a model the poem "Joy," written by a group of students.

10. Ask students to discuss its organization and word choice.
11. Pass out copies of the Checklist, which outlines the vital features of a good list poem, and go over the characteristics as a group.
12. Compare the items on the checklist to Carver's "Fear" and the collaborative student poem "Joy."
13. Allow the rest of the session for groups to compose a first draft of their poems.

Session Three

1. During this session, focus students' attention on revision and rewriting, leading to publication of the poems through class presentation.
2. Ask students to share the drafts of their list poem with another group. Each group should offer positive feedback as well as suggestions for improvement. Comments that encourage good revision should focus particularly on lines that are confusing, words that could be more powerful or more precise, ideas that might be added, and the relative strength of the ending.
3. Ask each response group to answer this question: "What is the essence of the poem?" In considering the response, the writers should reflect on whether they have communicated the message they intended to communicate.
4. Using the feedback from their classmates, ask each group to continue to revise its poem.
5. Remind students to return to the Checklist to verify that their final piece includes the specific features of a list poem.
6. When final drafts are complete, ask students to write their poems on poster paper. If time and/or inclination allow, students can also illustrate their poems with artwork. Alternatively, students can use the ReadWriteThink Printing Press to publish their poems in brochure or booklet format.
7. Have each group then presents its poem to the class. The presentation includes an oral reading (this might include a choral reading or a dramatic performance) as well as a short explanation of "how the poem came to be" in terms of decisions the group made regarding organization, word choice, and so forth.
8. Finally, hang the poems in the classroom for other students to enjoy!

Extensions:

Follow this lesson with Put That on the List: Independently Writing a Catalog Poem, which uses Carver's poem "The Car" as the model for catalog poems students write individually.

- In another variation on the "emotion poem," students can work alone or in groups to create a poem focusing the emotion on a specific experience which evokes that emotion. Although this is somewhat harder to do, the writing is often very moving. A group of my students who loved skateboarding created a poem on fear. This is helpful for at-risk students who may be struggling.
- List poems displayed in the classroom with accompanying artwork.
- Could consider self-publishing poetry in a classroom book or have students post poetry on a youth poetry website (see resources).
- Picture books can also be used to introduce or extend the lesson as models for additional poems. "Something Beautiful: Reading Picture Books, Writing Poetry" by Dean Schneider.

Adaptation: This type of exercise can be used in most any classroom setting and ability level by creating lists on specific topics such as:

- Categorizing procedures
- Identifying processes
- Historical time periods
- Characters
- Senses

Rationale:

Resources:

- Susanne Rubenstein from ReadWriteThink.org
- Ken Nasibitts Poetry for Kids -

  http://www.poetry4kids.com/modules.php?name=Web_Links&l_op=viewlink&cid=4org
- Student Interactive Printing Press from ReadWriteThink.org
- Raymond Carver in the Classroom: "A Small Good Thing" by Susanne Rubenstein from

  ReadWriteThink.org.

With appropriate adaptation and modifications, this is an excellent lesson for Special Education and Resource classes. It can also be used for a wide variety of age groups.

For a full list of CORE Standards and Objectives please visit ReadWriteThink.org and search for "Put That on the List: Collaboratively Writing a Catalog Poem" by Susanne Rubenstein