

Moving Poems: Kinesthetic Learning in the Literature Classroom

Virginia Zimmerman

Stressed and unstressed syllables pounded in my head as I struggled to plan the lesson on meter for my introduction to poetry. Meter is so difficult to teach effectively that many English professors bypass it altogether. Those of us who persist rely on triple-spaced short poems cluttered with dashes and slashes; we might lead our students in a round of exaggerated chanting or measured clapping. If we are lucky, half of the students will perform the scansion exercise reasonably well on the final exam, and one or two may incorporate an insight about meter into an analytic essay. When I had designed my syllabus, I had planned to trudge through “meter week” with a brave face and the familiar battery of exercises. Yet as early March approached and a serious midsemester slump cast a pall over the class, I was determined to try something new. Influenced by a workshop on experiential education, I brought kinesthetic learning into my literature classroom, and my students, literally moved by meter, leaped to a richer understanding and appreciation of poetry than I had imagined I could offer.

Experiential education means a lot of things, from wilderness training through Outward Bound to role-playing in psychotherapy, from constructing business models out of toothpicks to studying Shakespeare through puppetry. Of course, everything—from reading a poem to writing an essay to staging a debate—is an experience, but experiential education relies on distinctive experiences. Faced with the unexpected, the novel, or the dangerous, students achieve a heightened awareness of the subject matter and its value. Students in an introduction-to-poetry course expect to experience the act of reading poetry, but they do not expect to play charades, jump up and down

in class, form human lines of poetry, or play meter tag, all active-learning strategies that I have developed for my classes. These kinesthetic exercises have given my students rare insights into how poetry works and, at the same time, have established a valuable sense of community among the students.

Experiential learning, invoked as early as the 1930s, has not been integrated into mainstream academe, though many of us inadvertently apply its leading principle: “Genuine education comes about through experience” (Dewey 1997: 25). We moderate debates and conduct field trips, but few of us discuss experiential education. Searches in the major databases reveal a surprising dearth of theorizing about the value of experiential or even active learning in college pedagogy. The preference for active participation in class discussion over passive absorption of information, for example, has become almost a cliché, yet few people have explored the broader possibilities of experiential education. Steve Chapman et al. (1995: 236) are among the exceptions: “Whatever is being studied, the point is to place students into a different, more direct relationship with the material. Students are actively engaged—exploring things for themselves—rather than being told answers to questions.” Especially in introductory courses, students often feel distant from poetry, and activities designed to establish a more direct relationship between the student and the poem facilitate learning.

I first experimented with active, experiential learning on a whim. Frustrated one day with an unusually slow class and fearing a midsemester slump, I decided on a kinesthetic exercise to shake up the class. I asked the students to stand in front of their desks. They were wary but intrigued: as soon as I made an unexpected demand, they became more alert and engaged, wondering what would come next. I improvised a short narrative about striding across a plain and coming to a rut. As they realized what I was up to, some of the students began to smile; their mood suddenly changed from lethargy to anticipation. I exhorted the class to jump over the rut on the count of three: some students thought that the exercise was silly; others took my point seriously; but when I called out “Three!” every single one of them jumped. What might have been an embarrassing flop had strengthened the class community and had energized the students. So I felt that the class would be receptive to a kinesthetic approach to meter.

I had signaled that something unusual was coming when I warned the students to dress to spend the next class outside. Their distinctive experience began before class as they wondered how we would process the entry on meter in *The Glossary of Literary Terms* (Abrams 1999: 159–65) and a selection of poems, among them A. E. Housman’s “To an Athlete Dying Young”

and William Carlos Williams's "The Dance." Gathered on a lawn near the classroom, we stood in a circle, approximating our in-class formation, and reviewed the terminology from the *Glossary*. I asked the students to devise movements to represent stressed and unstressed syllables: one suggested a simple step for an unstressed syllable; another, a hop for a stressed syllable. So, to enact an iamb, we would step and then hop. I demonstrated, and the students followed. Soon we were moving across the green—step-hop, step-hop, step-hop—skipping our iambic feet. We moved on to other metrical feet. One student suggested a kick followed by a step to represent a trochee, and two steps and a hop became an anapest. We stepped, hopped, and kicked back and forth across the lawn, chanting, "Stressed, unstressed, stressed," as we moved. We were breathless and laughing and learning, and we no longer remotely resembled a group of students sitting in a tight circle.

After each foot had been given an established movement, we reassembled, and I opened the textbook. My battered *Norton Anthology* seemed out of place out-of-doors, and we faced the challenge of integrating two apparently different activities, reading and moving. I asked the students to embody the meter of "To an Athlete Dying Young," the easiest of the poems assigned. The fairly straightforward iambic tetrameter makes the poem simple to scan and to move through. We formed a sort of phalanx, and I recited the poem as we skipped across the green. After two stanzas I called a halt. Skipping hardly seemed appropriate for a poem about dying young, and, despite my best efforts to read quickly, the poem's pace forced us into a halting skip that challenged everyone's balance. We considered other ways to express iambic tetrameter. Standing in a cold wind on a damp green, my students learned that not all iambic verse has the same feel or conveys the same message. They determined that a march would fit the meter and convey the poem's tone, so we somberly marched back through the poem's final stanzas.

We shook off the gravity of Housman's poem with an exercise intended to ensure the students' familiarity with all metrical forms. The highlight of the session, meter tag, demonstrates experiential learning at its best: academic content met playground activity, and the extraordinary result was a scansion exercise that held the students' interest and enabled them to recognize metrical feet as far more than penciled slashes and dashes. The students formed two teams, each restricted to a particular metrical foot. For example, team A could move only in the step-step-hop of an anapest, and team B was limited to the spondee's constant hopping. When an anapest tagged a spondee, or vice versa, the tagged student joined the other team. I called out, "Scan!" and each team switched to a different meter. The students enjoyed themselves enor-

mously, and their willingness to be silly created a community spirit that lasted throughout the semester. No team won the game, and my neatly planned system quickly broke down into a melee of metrical feet, but after only a few minutes of clumsy stepping and hopping, the students had achieved an appreciation of meter that I felt confident would enrich their textbook understanding.

We ended class by moving through whole poems. I divided the students into groups and assigned each group to enact the meter of one poem. The most successful group waltzed to “The Dance.” Its whirling dactyls, and of course its title, made dancing an easy choice, but when they danced to it and inhabited its meter, the students perceived the poem’s complexity. They observed enjambment, with dactyls carrying over from one line to the next, and they noticed extra syllables that complicated the meter. They handled these and the accompanying caesuras with a pause and curtsy: acting out the irregularities led to a keen awareness of the poem’s rhythm and its effects. Active learning made meter week a distinctive experience for each student.

Teaching meter was also a distinctive learning experience for me, as I took my pedagogy in a new direction. In one of the few extended treatments of this topic, David A. Kolb (1984: 21) identifies a cycle of experiential learning in which learning moments and subsequent, or even simultaneous, reflection drive one another. I continue to reflect on the possibilities of kinesthetic learning in a literature classroom, and, as I experiment with active-learning strategies, I join my students in revising my assumptions through extraordinary experiences. In that first class, almost all of the students incorporated observations about meter into the two essays they wrote after meter week, and every one of them earned a high score on the section of the final exam devoted to scansion. Moreover, by moving through the metrical dimension of poetry, they acquired a profound appreciation of poetry’s complexity. They will not soon forget skipping across the lawn to the beat of Housman’s poem, and when they struggle to scan a line of poetry, they may recall chasing a classmate encumbered by dactylic feet.

Works Cited from the Classroom

- Abrams, M. H. 1999. *The Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th ed. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Bauer, Marion Dane. 1994. "The Gay Lesbian Connection." *Bookbird* 32, no. 2: 25–30.
- Bloom, Harold. 1985. "Emerson: The American Religion." In *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Harold Bloom, 97–121. New York: Chelsea House.
- Cart, Michael. 1996. *My Father's Scar: A Novel*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Chapman, Steve, et al. 1995. "What Is Experiential Education?" In *The Theory of Experiential Education*, ed. Karen Warren, Mitchell Sakofs, and Jasper S. Hunt Jr. 3d ed., 234–47. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt.
- Cole, Phyllis. 1975. "Emerson, England, and Fate." In *Emerson—Prophecy, Metamorphosis, and Influence*, ed. David Levin, 83–105. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cormier, Robert. 1974. *The Chocolate War*. New York: Pantheon.
- Crutcher, Chris. 1991. *Athletic Shorts: Six Short Stories*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Dewey, John. 1997. *Experience and Education*. New York: Touchstone.
- Eco, Umberto. 1990. *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Garden, Nancy. 1982. *Annie on My Mind*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Harris, Muriel. 1979. "The Overgraded Paper: Another Case of More Is Less." In *How to Handle the Paper Load*, ed. Gene Stanford and the Committee on Classroom Practices, 91–94. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Horvath, Brooke K. 1984. "The Components of Written Response: A Practical Synthesis of Current Views." *Rhetoric Review* 2: 136–56.
- Kerr, M. E. 1994. *Deliver Us from Evie*. New York: HarperCollins.

- Kinder, Deborah Jean. 1998. "To Follow Your Heart: Coming Out through Literacy." *English Journal* 88, no. 2: 63–69.
- Kolb, David A. 1984. *Experiential Learning: Experience As the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Lauer, Janice M., et al. 1991. *Four Worlds of Writing*. 3d ed. New York: HarperCollins.
- Mailloux, Steven. 1989. *Rhetorical Power*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Murray, Donald M. 1979. "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference." *College English* 41: 13–18.
- Nelson, Theresa. 1994. *Earthshine: A Novel*. New York: Orchard.
- O'Neill, Molly. 1999. "A Surgeon's War on Breast Cancer." In *The Call to Write*, ed. John Trimbur, 235–40. New York: Longman.
- Parravano, Martha V. 1995. "Deliver Us from Evie." Review. *Horn Book Magazine*, January–February, 63–64.
- Rose, Alan. 1982. "Spoken versus Written Criticism of Student Writing—Some Advantages of the Conference Method." *College Composition and Communication* 33: 326–30.
- Shuman, R. Baird. 1979. "How to Grade Student Writing." In *How to Handle the Paper Load*, ed. Gene Stanford and the Committee on Classroom Practices, 95–96. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Sommers, Nancy. 1999. "Responding to Student Writing." In *The New St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing*, ed. Robert Connors and Cheryl Glenn, 339–47. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Sperling, Melanie. 1992. "In-Class Writing Conferences: Fine-Tuned Duets in the Classroom Ensemble." *English Journal* 81, no. 4: 65–71.
- Stoddard, Thomas R. 1999. "Gay Marriages: Make Them Legal." In *Short Takes: Model Essays for Composition*, ed. Elizabeth Penfield. 6th ed., 292–94. New York: Longman.
- Weaver, Richard M. 1970. "Language Is Sermonic." In *Language Is Sermonic: Richard M. Weaver on the Nature of Rhetoric*, ed. Richard L. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland, and Ralph T. Eubanks, 201–25. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Whicher, Stephen E., ed. 1957. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Organic Anthology*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- White, Edward M. 1996. "Power and Agenda Setting in Writing Assessment." In *Assessment of Writing: Politics, Policies, Practices*, ed. Edward M. White, William D. Lutz, and Sandra Kamusikiri, 9–24. New York: Modern Language Association of America.