

Found Poetry from Student Conversations

by Taylor Johnson

Education level: Pre-school, kindergarten, elementary

Genre: Poetry, Fiction

Time frame: 60 minutes or a single class period, with a follow-up lesson to share the finished work with students.

Objective: To capture spontaneous student utterances and compile them into found poetry or short stories to share back with students.

Prior knowledge and skills: Teacher fluency using audio-capturing software, like a voice recording app on a phone.

Required materials: A voice recording app, a Bluetooth speaker, and some kind of content lesson, activity, or question about which the students can talk or discuss to spark the material for the found poem or story.

Literary model: None

Younger students' capacity to develop language through oral means is likely more fluent than their ability to handwrite original poems or stories. It's deeply empowering for them to see and hear their spoken words and ideas as written poetry, and your gentle, curative attention to their original ideas can help them make the leap to see and hear themselves as writers.

Sequence of Activities:

1. Gather the students in a shared space like a circle on a rug or around a table. Begin recording using your app or other device. It's helpful if the students know in advance that you are recording them since they will be intrigued and want to add their voices to the mix.
2. Give the students an interesting object or some kind of stimulus that will get them to contribute their ideas. This lesson component can be paired with literally any activity that gets students talking.
3. When you call on students, call on them by name so that later when you're transcribing their contributions to the discussion, you'll be able to easily identify speakers. In any case, make a record of the names of all the students who participated in the activity to credit them all as contributors to any group poem that is created.
4. After the activity is done, stop recording. Save the file and name it so you can find it/identify it later.
5. In a quiet moment away from the students, replay the recording, being prepared to stop and start it frequently as you write out a transcript of the raw material of what each student says.
6. After you have a transcript, type it or voice type it into a document. Keep an eye out for clear utterances of original language contributed by each student. It may be that some of the students

contribute ideas that were not part of the given prompt. Stay alert for curious turns of phrase or crosstalk that generated interesting expressions or conversational language that has a feeling of fresh and ingenious construction, even if it was not expected or intended by the lesson, and especially if the students themselves would not even have been aware that it may be poetic or funny or clever or detailed or well-spoken. You'll obviously want to attend to their direct responses to the content you were asking them about, but there may be other, unexpected comments or statements that arise over the course of the discussion that feel interesting, funny, or otherwise want to make their way into a found poem.

7. Assemble the utterances that you would like to include into one group poem or several individual poems (or stories, etc.).

8. Record yourself slowly and animatedly reading the finished poem(s) aloud. Be sure to credit by name all students who contributed to the poem(s) in the recording.

9. Play the recording of the found poem back to the students after hooking up your device to a Bluetooth speaker. Watch as their faces gleam with delight when they hear their own words mirrored back to them in this group poem or in individual poems or stories.

10. You can print out individual poems or group poems and stories and give the print-outs to the students to incorporate into other projects or portfolios.