

My Soul is a Mystery Box by Sophie Daws

Education level: Pre-school, kindergarten

Genre: Poetry, Hybrid

Time frame: 45 minutes

Objective: To incorporate the 5 senses, to encourage imagination (making guesses of what something could be)

Prior knowledge and skills: None

Required materials: Cardboard box, outdoor space, mystery objects to place in the box, portable dry erase board or poster board for writing collaborative poems

Literary model: None

In his exhibit [“Big Paper Beatnik Poems // Inside, Outside, In the Middle, Jazz Be Jazz Be.”](#) Juan Felipe Herrera writes poems in sharpie on cardboard boxes, paper bags, and used envelopes. In this exhibit, his sharpied words feel free. The poems transgress the normal functions of the bag, envelope, or box he’s writing on, and have a feeling of written-in-real-time—the object informs the writing.

I wondered what it might be like to break the rules of where poems are supposed to live (usually books, journals, and word processors) with my Writing the Community kindergarten class at Pueblo Gardens Elementary School. I wanted them to write directly on some piece of “trash”. Cardboard boxes immediately came to mind. They’re easy to write on, three-dimensional, *and* you can put things inside of them. Thus emerged this exercise, “My Soul is a Mystery Box.”

For this exercise I placed objects into the box that we could observe using our five senses, and we wrote our guesses of what inside on the box *on* the box itself. This exercise focuses on play as much as it does writing a poem—much of the reason I’m drawn to Herrera’s work.

Pre-class preparation

1. Find a small to medium sized cardboard box. If you have time and the desire, decorate the box so it has a magical feel. Paint the mystery box in different colors, add glitter, scraps of paper, stickers—go wild.
2. Find items around your house to add to the box. My only vision for collecting objects was variety. I included photographs (the more abstract the better), small stones from my yard, flowers from around my neighborhood, yarn, dice, an orange. Your objects don’t need to be spectacular. In fact, mundane can be better. Think of Herrera’s work which turns a Starbucks bag into an exciting poem.

Set-up

- Explain that today you brought in a “Mystery Box,” which you will discuss later. We are going to set the box to the side, much like a soup needs to simmer so that it cooks up more magic.

Five Senses Warm-Up *10 minutes*

- Explain that before even touching the mystery box, the students are going to go on a scavenger hunt around the garden for their five *favorite* items. Tell them that when done, you’ll meet as a group.
- Depending on the garden and its rules, you might allow students to bring their most favorite of the favorite five items back with them to the group. Check with your school if students can pick leaves from the trees, flowers from the garden, and move rocks around.
- Allow students ample time to explore. I tend to let them explore until I notice their attention wane (usually when they start getting restless and bickering with one another).
- Have the class return to the group either in a circle on the grass or at a picnic table.
- Ask students to name the five senses. Once the group has identified the five senses, ask questions about their favorite object using these five senses. A few examples are below:
 - Everyone must be *super* quiet for this part. Close your eyes, hold your object up to your ear, and listen closely. What does your object sound like?
 - Okay, listen again. What is your object telling you?
 - What does your object feel like when you touch it? Does it remind you of anything else?
- Feel free to write these ideas on a white board or poster board, or if given consent by your classroom teacher, record this discussion on your phone and transcribe later into a poem.

What’s in the box? *5 minutes*

- Remind the students about the magical word “imagination.” (I start off my residencies with younger students with a discussion about what imagination is). Have a quick discussion. I like to explain imagination as a kind of magic where we turn the unreal into the real. I remind them that when we use our imagination, we don’t have to make sense.
- Ask the students to use their imagination and guess what’s in the box. Remind them it can be *anything!* It can be helpful to give some examples of what could be in the box in the beginning.
- As they share ideas, write on the box. Experiment with writing in small letters, huge letters, in cursive letters, etc. Try writing so that it takes up most of the box.

Pick-an-object *20 minutes*

- Tell the students the time has come, that they’ve been patient, and now you are going to unveil what’s in the Mystery Box!

- Instruct the students you are going to call them up in groups (about three to five students at a time). Once they come up to the box, they can explore what's inside.
- Once they've explored, tell the students they must pick their favorite object in the box. Then they can return to the group circle/table with their object.
- Much like the objects they found in the garden, ask the students to describe their favorite object using the five senses. As before, prompting them with questions around the five senses bears fruitful results.

Note: I found it very helpful to record this session and play it back later. This allowed the discussion to flow naturally.

Soul Imagination

- For my last round of questions, I asked the students to imagine what this object's insides would look like.
- I then asked, "If this object had a soul, what would its soul look like?"
- We discussed a variety of possibilities from color to patterns, to how it would feel.
- I then asked students what they're soul would be like and if it would be anything like their object's soul.
- Feel free to keep asking questions about their object and about themselves until you feel like you have a few poems written. See below for examples!

Example Poems:

Mystery Box discussion

My Soul is a Mystery Box

My soul smells like grass and a little bit of sand
 My soul is sometimes bumpy like the side of a rocky mountain
 My soul is the sound of maracas shaking themselves
 My soul sounds like the waves crashing
 My soul is a zipper zipping itself up!
 My soul is the sound of sizzling, popping popcorn
 My soul sounds like the swish! swish! of a puppy wagging its tail after I've gotten home from school

Five Senses Warm-Up exercise

The big, green leaf

The green plant is saying thank you
 The green plant sounds like someone breaking bricks with a hammer
 The green plant says give me a cookie

The big, green leaf is shaking like a tree
 The green leaf sounds like the waves crashing

The leaf sounds like a mountain

The leaf sounds like a sandstorm

The leaf sounds like big waves

The leaf sounds like a waterfall falling down my back

The leaf sounds like a bag of candy crunching