

“Presents/Presence” is an improvisational activity in which one person mimes giving a gift to another person (in this case, the group) and the receiver interprets what they have received (without trying to read the giver’s mind! – I’ll say more about this later). This activity is designed to facilitate:

- connection between participants
- attention to the present moment, concrete details, and descriptive language
- imaginative leaps and creative risks
- comfort with not knowing
- delight in surprise

I learned about this activity from Robert Poynton in his book [*Do/Improvise \(Do Books, 2014\)*](#) and I’ve adapted it for poetry classrooms hundreds of times. In the last year, I’ve adapted it for zoom classrooms and I’m genuinely amazed each time at how well it works to bring us “into the room together” even while apart.

Logistics:

- For this activity, you will need cameras on (or, at least the camera of the giver).
- Mics may be on or muted.
- Chat box must be enabled.

When to use this activity:

- It is excellent as an icebreaker.
- It also works well as a transition activity (especially moving into a writing lesson).
- Anytime you want your students to practice using concrete language and/or detailed description.
- Anytime you want to think metaphorically about presence and gift giving.
- Anytime your class needs an imagination and/or energy boost.
- If you establish this in your class early on during the semester, it’s useful to return to it in times of conflict or struggle or disengagement.

Basic rules for zoom version:

- A person (the giver) mimes the shape and weight of an object they are giving to the group – *without knowing exactly what it is* (this second part is key – encourage your students to quickly follow their intuition – scoop something heavy off the ground, snatch something small from the sky, etc. The danger in knowing and trying to get the audience to read their minds is failure and we are going for an environment in which we can all equally participate and we can all win!).
- The giver then says, “Here, I got this for you,” and gestures it toward the camera.
- Then, everyone in the group simultaneously types into the chat, “Thank you for this _____,” filling in the blank with some detailed description of what they received (without trying to read the giver’s mind and without trying to see what other people write – simply by responding to the shape and weight).
- After about 15 seconds, you will have as many different answers as there are people and it is an utter delight to see what gifts they received (all from the same gesture)!
- Then, switch givers and repeat until everyone has given a gift.

Additional thoughts/tips:

- It's really helpful to demonstrate this first with someone who is comfortable with improvising. I usually begin by asking for a volunteer – someone who will be the first giver and I'll be the first receiver. I receive first so I can model the types of answers that are concrete, playful, and still adhere to the general shape and weight of the gift.
- When stating the “rules” I'm very careful to say: “We will not be giving or receiving abstractions today – we aren't giving world peace or love or joy. Instead, we are using concrete language to describe/name the mimed gift – moldy popcorn, a flower made of newspaper, a partially deflated blue ball, a snail's toe, a box of bees, a leaf from a Blue Gum tree, etc. The only thing you need to do to “get it right” is use concrete language and description that generally matches the shape and weight of what is mimed. So, if someone gives you something that fits in the palm of their hand and is very light, it would match if you said “a whale's front tooth” but it wouldn't match if you said “a whale.” You can be playful, imaginative, extravagant, and weird – just stick to the general constraint of shape and weight.”
- I also demonstrate giving a gift quickly and without any planning. I demonstrate allowing my hands/body to begin shaping the space and then giving it weight by trying to pick it up or scooting it on the floor, etc.
- I encourage folx to be decisive in their movements without controlling what other people must see. THIS IS NOT CHARADES. Think of the difference between 1. carefully holding a baby and cooing in its face and 2. reaching into the air with both hands and bringing them together to pull down something that is heavy. Notice how the first one is very predetermined for the receiver – we could all identify that shape and action very quickly and it limits the answer to only one possibility. Whereas the second one could be an infinite number of items as long as it could be grabbed with two hands and pulled down by using some muscle!
- After each round, take a few seconds to skim through the responses and delight with the group – imagination encourages imagination. I try to read out an answer or two between rounds, taking care to lift up each person in the group at least once.

Debrief:

- My favorite questions after anything are: What did you notice? Any surprises? What patterns emerged? When/how were the patterns broken? When did you feel connected to the activity/to yourself/to others?
- Other questions for this activity: How did it feel to give a gift? What was it like to give something without knowing exactly what it was? How did it feel to receive? When did you feel vulnerable and how did you handle that? Were there any aha moments? What were they? What can this teach us about writing/reading/poetry? What can this teach us about conflict?
- With this activity, it's an easy leap to how reading/writing/poetry require presence and that reading/writing/poetry are presents we give ourselves and each other. It's also easy to see how writing is the act of shaping space and weight and then giving it away – so there is a field of interpretations that respond to the shape and weight (and, of course, there is a field of interpretations that don't and another field that stretch it very far, and these are fun to discuss too!).

In the next blog post, I'll describe some activities you can build off of this one!