



Jowen Hillyer

Jowen Hillyer engages Year 9 with guerrilla poetry...

Poetry is “thoughts that breathe and words that burn” (Gray). So how do I convince year 9 that this does not mean burning poetry in the quad?

When it comes to poetry we often find it difficult to engage our students beyond a bit of slam poetry and an acrostic they did in primary school. I found during our poetry units in the past that while we tested and explored and questioned it was often teacher directed and led.

Of course this is essential - students can't break the rules until they learn them and they can't know what speaks to them without looking at lots and lots of rich and varied examples. However, where do they go after that assessment?

Do they ever get the opportunity to move away from “what does this poem mean?” and instead answer the question “what does poetry mean to me?”

I have always loved the abbreviated Gray quote: “Poetry is thoughts that breathe and words that burn”. To me it always summed up the idea that poetry was more than words on a page. It was big feeling and big ideas told in the most concise and provocative way possible.

I needed to get this same feeling across to year 9 students (a pretty mixed bunch of kids who tolerated English but would much rather be somewhere else). We had already completed the prescribed unit and assessment. They had written a comparative essay on two poems and studied all the techniques and poetic forms. Yet still poetry *meant* nothing to them, despite my best efforts...

So began the “Guerrilla Poetry Project”. In small discussion groups with some trusty old butcher's paper they had to brainstorm, then present, what they thought the Gray quote meant. In a nutshell (apart from a few kids who insisted it meant we burn the poetry books) it was agreed that poetry is not a static thing; it describes and demands action.

For my part, I wanted to SEE how they felt and thought.

Divergent teaching calls for a different type of assessment, one that is not assessing against a common set of criteria but one that allows for artistic freedom. Project based learning marries well with this aim. An authentic assessment, immersion and engagement are all part of the learning cycle. *Please see the attachment at the end of the online version for planning ideas and suggested poems.*



So why choose guerrilla poetry?

Really it began for selfish reasons; guerrilla poetry appeals to my creative, fun English nerd; the one who giggles at literary puns, corrects menus in my head and spends hours deliberating over which literary figures I would have over for dinner.

For the uninitiated, guerrilla poetry is publishing poetry in unconventional ways and in unconventional places. As the Red Room Company explains, “Guerrilla means ‘little war’” in Spanish. Poets who publish guerrilla poems are fighting their own “little war” to find new audiences for and new ways of writing poetry”. To do this I needed to generate excitement, get permission and get creative.

Curiosity and wonder are still alive and well in our secondary students - we just need to coax it out sometimes.

Our box of supplies was inspired by our book room. I work in a school which originated in 1908 and the building I work in was built in 1925. Some of the texts have been there that long. In a move from an old book room to a new modernised system we uncovered stacks of poetry text books from the 1920s-1960s. I knew these could form the basis of my guerrilla poetry supply box. Students could read them, rip them, create with them and play with them. I also added chalk, ornaments, some bizarre dolls’ heads from a \$2 shop, wooden spoons, parachute soldiers, fun stationery and more.

I showed the students some images of guerrilla poetry to inspire them and told them all about the following different types:

Broadsiding

Leaving poetry in unexpected places - in a book, on a bus, in pigeonholes, under doors.



Some examples were under car windscreen wipers and in the pigeonholes of ‘non-humanities’ teachers.

Poetry: “Thoughts that breathe and words that burn”



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Chapbooks

Little self-created books of poetry left in unexpected places.

Chalk Art

A favourite of students is chalk art; especially for the students in distinction classes/GATS groups who would never think to graffiti. In this project they get to do it, with poetry and with permission!

And some others, including:

- Installations;
- transient art (art that is not permanent);
- poem in a pocket (sneaking up on someone and secretly leaving a poem in their pocket!);
- publishing poetry on the sides of buses or on the back of toilet doors.

You do need to consider your context.

I have to admit that I never tell my students about the possibility of sneaking up on people to put poetry on their person (I really do not want to open that can of worms). A few of my students absolutely loved creating installations that were there one day and gone the next – they got to have their own ‘superhero’ moment, to be mysterious - there is freedom in anonymity for students when they are being asked to express themselves.

As we progressed into the next unit of work, the guerrilla poetry task was their independent learning.

Students were to email me photographs of their ‘subversive’ guerrilla activities. These involved:

- Dropping army parachute men with their favourite quotes on them out the second-storey windows at school.



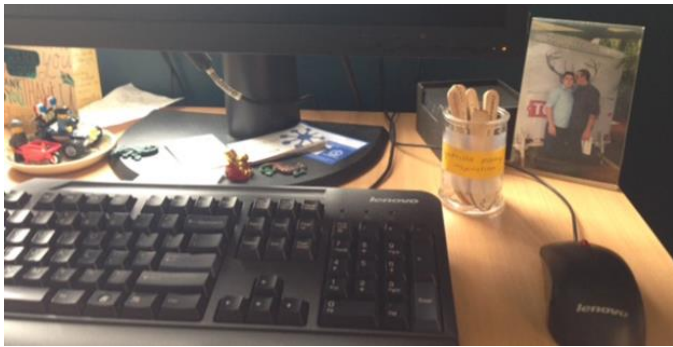
Here students are literally ‘poetry bombing’ the quad with parachute men. The poetry choice was unusual - not war poetry but a poem for girls with the key message “never grow a wishbone where your backbone ought to be”.

Poetry: “Thoughts that breathe and words that burn”

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- A series of wooden spoons with different lines of poetry left in a jar on the Principal’s desk.



*T.S Eliot inspired: “I have **measured** out my life with **coffee spoons**”. The idea was appropriated in this installation.*

- Poems in pigeonholes.... or fridges.



We are sure that this would have been a nice moment for a frazzled teacher grabbing their lunch.



- Chalk poetry and origami.



Boxes made out of prose, filled with tiny origami hearts covered in poetry found their way onto my desk months after the project finished.

- Poems in bowling shoes at sport.



A rural bowling alley for school sport was the scene for this guerrilla action.

There was no formalised assessment for this project based learning, as the formal assessment had already taken place. The measure of learning was anecdotally obvious - the art installations, the ongoing



exploration of poetry. What they were asked to do was to, as our syllabus encourages, reflect on their learning.

They needed to answer the big question: “What does poetry mean to ME and how did my guerrilla poetry reflect this?”

All students had different answers of course; some found that certain poetry connected with their lives, others discovered rhythms, one or two started bravely adding their own words to their installations but all of them found more in poetry than they could have imagined.

This unit allowed us to step away from NAPLAN circle filling. It allowed for true, authentic engagement with purpose, audience and text and it allowed me to see my students grow in love of literature and language.

Online Resources

The Red Room Company

From their website: Founded by Johanna Featherstone in 2003, The Red Room Company (RRC) has grown to be Australia’s key organisation for the creation and commissioning of new poetry by established and emerging poets as well as students. Their mission is to make poetry a meaningful part of everyday life. They collaborate with schools, poets and communities.

http://redroomcompany.org/media/uploads/spineout-collabo/spineout_guerrilla_poetry.pdf

The Buck Institute for Education

This organisation is an instructional leader in project based learning. There are useful resources, hints, tips and support. This is an international organisation which seeks advice and feedback from many sources, countries and contexts.

<http://www.bie.org/>



Bianca Hewes

Bianca Hewes is a teacher leading the research and process of PBL in schools. She has generously shared templates, ideas and projects, including the publication of K-10 resources

- <https://biancahewes.wordpress.com/2013/05/11/project-based-learning-and-the-australian-curriculum-general-capabilities-part-3/>
- <https://biancahewes.wordpress.com/2014/01/23/resources-for-running-a-pbl-workshop/>

Jowen Hillyer is currently Head Teacher of English at Taree High School (a Connected Communities school) in rural NSW. She has been a teacher, head teacher and teacher educator for 19 years, with experience in both rural and disadvantaged public schools, as well as 3 years as an Associate Lecturer at The University of Sydney. In her current role, Jowen leads a large, diverse faculty in new approaches, innovation and student engagement. Her research interests are centred on project based learning, boys’ writing in the middle years and mentoring programs for beginning English teachers.