
MCTE Classroom Grant Pays for Poetry Booklets

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“**T**oday was actually a fun day to be on lunch duty,” one of my colleagues said, stopping me in the hallway between classes one day last winter. “There were kids sitting around reading poetry while they ate. The other kids were wandering around getting their friends to sign their books. Those poetry books your classes made are great!”

Another teacher stopped me a few days later after she had read the poetry book herself: “You know, this kid is a complete goof-off in my science class, but I’m just blown away by his poem. I’m glad you did this project because now I have something nice to talk with him about tomorrow!”

With help from the COMPAS Writers and Artists in the Schools Program www.compas.org/pages/waits.html and funding from MCTE, my students wrote and published a booklet of poetry. In the process, they learned about sensory images and figurative language, they gained confidence in their writing, and began the important process of self-representation. This last goal is, I believe, important for all students, but is perhaps particularly important for my students, who are mostly immigrant, African, Muslim and poor. American mass media perpetuates many negative images of people in these demographic categories and writing original poetry about themselves and their lives became a way for my students to assert their own power over representation.

COMPAS Program comes to my school:

At the 2005 MCTE Spring Conference I attended a session about the COMPAS Writers and Artists in the Schools Program. COMPAS brings professional artists and writers into classrooms for week-long residencies. I knew about the program from the perspective of having been a 7th grader in the early 1980's when a COMPAS poet came to our classroom. It wasn't until 2005, however, that I brought a COMPAS poet to my own classroom. For twelve years I had taught at a large suburban high school where there were fifteen teachers in the English department, and asking for a thousand dollars for only four classes for one week was pretty much out of the question. But a career change to a small charter school (English department of one!) seemed like a great time to reconnect with COMPAS.

My school, Ubah Medical Academy, is a high school of 180 students located in North Minneapolis. The school was created by members of the East African (mainly Somali and Oromo) communities in the Twin Cities. We have students who have lived in the United States almost all of their lives, and we have students who have come to the U. S. in the past year. Even from the "newcomer" population, there's a range of experience: some are essentially entering the first formal education they've ever had, others were educated in refugee camps, and others went to expensive schools in Kenya or other parts of the world. Like any school, ours is full of students with stories to tell and voices that should be nurtured.

In August I contacted COMPAS requesting their brochure. Early in the fall I asked our school directors for financial approval of the residency, which was readily granted. Then I "shopped" through the brochure, reading the personal statements of the writers, and sent in my request for a residency. The folks at COMPAS then contacted my "first choice" poet and put the two of us in e-mail contact.

Ms. Mai Neng Moua became "our poet" for the week. I thought that her experience as a child refugee from Laos and her interest in nurturing the voices of Hmong poets in the United States would match up well with my students' in-

terests and experiences. She had written about her childhood shyness in her personal statement, bringing to mind several of my students, especially those newest to the U. S. I was also eager to have my students work with a Hmong woman because very few of them had ever spoken to a Hmong person before.

The Academic Objectives:

When Mai Neng and I first met to discuss the residency, we talked about what my students needed. I identified two particular areas of weakness in my students' writing that we felt a poetry week could address: lack of specific detail, and a hesitancy to use figurative language. I also explained that many students in the classes would be taking the MCA II test in Written Composition in January (a state graduation requirement). As ELL students, writing conventions are always a perpetual challenge, one that can sometimes prevent them from passing the test. However, the MCA is scored holistically with writing conventions as one of several criteria, so I tell my students that their best chance for passing is to have particularly strong ideas, vocabulary and detail to balance out the probable misspellings and occasional lapses of standard grammar or sentence construction. Any work Mai Neng could accomplish with getting my students to feel more comfortable with sensory images and concrete details in poetry, I believed, would only help them with higher scores on the MCA test.

The Residency:

In retrospect, it is hard to believe how much was accomplished in only one week of the poetry residency. Mai Neng built rapport with the students quickly and had them reading and writing poetry every day. Each day she had a new poetry prompt and model poems that she read with the students. She gave them time to write in class, circulating around the room answering questions and encouraging students. She collected the poems at the end of the hour, allowing students who wanted to work on them at home to take their work. The next day she always had a few poems selected from the group to read to the class. Then she handed the rest of the poems back and proceeded to the next prompt. By Friday, every student had written four different poems.

Friday classes at our school are short in order to accommodate Friday prayers in the afternoon, so Mai Neng used that day in class to talk about reading poems out loud. In class, students were encouraged to choose a poem they had written. They each had to read their poem loudly and slowly.

Friday afternoon during activity period, I hosted our school's first "open mic" poetry reading and my classroom was packed with students who chose to read and listen to each other's poetry instead of playing soccer or socializing. To spruce up the event, I brought cookies and bottled water and the students took turns going to the front of the room and reading their work. Clearly, Mai Neng and the COMPAS program were a big hit with my students.

MCTE Classroom Grant and Publication:

I didn't want the week to just be an isolated experience for the students in my class. I wrote for a classroom grant from MCTE to help pay for the publication of the student poems. With the money we received from MCTE, we published a 104 page, spiral bound, 8.5"x5.5" booklet of poetry that we distributed to the students, faculty and other members of the Somali community. The students selected and typed their own poems for inclusion in the booklet and voted to arrange the poems alphabetically by the poet's last name.

Once the booklet was completed, we had a "book launch and signing." In each class, students spent time reading and reacting to the poems and signing each other's books.

The Conclusion:

The classroom grant from MCTE not only allowed students a real publishing opportunity, but also placed high interest poetry in the homes of my students. In this community there is a great reverence for books and a document like the one we produced is taken surprisingly seriously. The students themselves poured over the poems as if it were a yearbook, and parents, siblings and extended family members are also reading these poems. I hope that the booklet has inspired some interesting cross-generational conversation and helped adults in the community to see the diversity that exists in our young people.

And, yes, the students who were able to participate in the COMPAS program did quite well on their MCA II tests, too!

Below I have selected three student poems from each day of the residency: “The Broken Country”, “Muddy Streets” and “New York (Lost, Lost Memories)” are place poems using the six senses.

The Broken Country

by Iman Warsame

One night

I dreamed about Somalia

It was green and beautiful

But there was a red river over there

“That is blood,” my mom said

I heard children crying

“Why?” I asked

I turned left, I saw men shooting

I turned right, I saw children lying

On the ground

I ran to them

They turned into roses

I touched them

They were so soft

“Rest roses,” I said

I turned back

My mom held my hand

“Let’s go to that village,” she said

I smelled the rain falling to wash the dirt

“Shook Shook” I heard the sound of the rain
falling on the poor roofs

“Somalia,” I said

the broken country

“Somalia,” I said

The country that was beautiful once

Somalia, the country I have never seen

But dream about

I felt alone. I prayed to God to save Somalia

The Muddy Streets

by Abdi Jama

When I remember the muddy streets of Nairobi,
I see guys carrying garbage bags three times their size.
After I see the homeless guy,
I see a mother with her children sitting in front
of a tiny steel house selling charcoal in empty paint cans.
As I crouch to buy a can of charcoal,
I touch it to see if it is soft, and
I let my hands get black.
Next to them is a man
who gets paid to iron clothing with a charcoal-heated iron.
I give the man a shirt to iron.
I come back after thirty minutes with fifteen shillings and take
my shirt.
Across the muddy street is a large dump site
where trash reaches three stories high.
I really don't know why these streets seemed so healthy,
but I wish I could go back.

New York (Lost, Lost Memories)

by Said Mohamed

A *yo nigga* is just a way to say hi
When you think New York
you think Donald Trump or 50 Cent
You also think cars and taxis
But when I think of New York
I think of 4 years of boarding school
I can still hear voices of kids
all boys and no toys
I smell the food that's cooked with gallons of oil by Moby
I can still taste the nasty aftertaste of *aloo goosh*
and most of all I feel the pain of punishment
but mostly I can still see all my homeboys
and the crazy missions we used to do.

They were my ying and my yang but now here,
More than 500 miles away, they're lost memories.

The next three poems are "Where I'm From Poems". The students were concentrating on identifying many factors that make them who they are and expressing those influences in concrete images.

I Am From

by Abyan Farah

I am from Somalia
Learning to love all my people
I'm from the bloody wars between different tribes
I'm from cleaning my house for that fresh scent
I'm from getting yelled at by my family every time I do
something wrong
I'm from leaving my country to go to another country
for my safety and to get an education
I'm from going to school in order to learn something new
I'm from chilling with my friends
and telling each other jokes
I'm from going to the movies to check out the latest,
hottest movie
I'm from being quiet, not so loud.
I'm from dancing each day, inventing new moves
I'm from dressing nice, smelling good, looking fine,
and always staying fresh.
I'm from leaning back while I relax and enjoy my life.
I'm from Abyan a smart, nice, beautiful, confused girl.
I'm from my mom.
I didn't spend lots of time with her, but I miss her very,
very much
I'm waiting for the day I see her again in heaven *inshallah*.
if god is willing.

From Nairobi

by Ijaabo Ali

I'm from where people
Greet each other by simple *asalama aleekum*
which means "peace be upon you."
I'm from Kenya community where people pray five
times every day. I'm from the beautiful land of Kenya.
I'm from the lovely city of Nairobi where my grandmother
used to take me walking every sunrise. I'm from a place
where people eat *mukate* and *blue band* as breakfast
and eat *sukuma* and *ugali* as a lunch.
I'm from the friendly noises like African music instrument
and neighborhoods.
I'm from where I grew up.
I'm from our small house.
I'm from my great grandfathers.
I'm from every great storyteller;
I'm from every caring family.
I'm from my dad who is such a sweetheart. I'm from my
mother who always anticipates with all that she has
to make us the most respectful and independent kids.
I'm from my sisters and brothers
who are carefree about me.
I'm from my dedicated teachers.
I'm from my encouraging friends.
I'm from every devoted family.
I'm from this crazy earth.

I Am From

by Niyah Muhammad

I am from my culture,
Some African-American, some
Native American.
I can't be sure how much.
I am from the food I love,
Candy, spaghetti, and fried

Rice.

I am from a family of 11
Children, all of them younger
Except one, my older sister.
I am from my favorite day of
The year, Eid.
I am from my numerous
Friends of many different
Races. I am from Minneapolis,
Minnesota, where I will stay.
I am from my dream of growing
Up, going to college, and having
A family.

I am from throwing snowballs
At my brother's face in the winter.
I am from the wind I hear in the
Trees at night that keep me from
Sleeping. I am from my favorite
Color, green.

I am from hating George Bush
For what he's doing to Iraq.
I am from my parents and
Grandparents.

“Embarrassment,” “Excitement,” and “Anger” are Emotion Poems. The students were trying to capture the essence of an emotion using concrete images.

Embarrassment

by Ilyas A. Berento Ahmed

You are the one who doesn't talk to anyone
The one who stands alone
The one who thinks he is ugly
The one who doesn't try anything new
Who only does it in his heart
The one that is poor

The one that thinks everybody is going to laugh at him
Who thinks he is a joke
Who somebody else does the talking for him
Who thinks everyone is better than him
The one who is never going to break the wall between him
and nature
Whose face gets red
Who laughs
Who hides his face
Who runs away
Who sweats
Who never practices

Excitement

by Kanwal Mehmud

You are the clock that doesn't want to tick,
but goes off every five seconds.
You are the bright yellow car that just crossed the red light,
A child right before a favorite fieldtrip.
Excitement, you are the butterflies inside my stomach
before a spelling bee.
You are the racecar that starts without waiting for the whistle to
blow,
A lion that roars at the top of a mountain,
The sun that rises at three in the morning.
You are the drums drumming two hours before a parade.
You are a rooster cock-a-doodling before sun-up.
You are the cake whose icing has been licked off
before the party began.
Excitement, you are the writer with a mind filled with stories
but have no paper around to write them.

Anger

by Ismail Yusuf

You are the feeling that does not go away,
The not wanting to talk,
The color red,

A trip to the dentist.
Anger, you are the clinched knuckles,
The pain in my heart,
A gray cloud in the sky.
Anger, you are the chip on my shoulder,
The confusion in my head,
The death of joy,
The beating of my tongue.
Anger, you are the grinding of my teeth.