**Close Reading and Craft**

**Age Group**: Middle School, High School, College, and beyond

**Subject(s):** Language Arts – Poetry and Creative Writing

**Time Required**: 45-60 minutes

**Lesson Overview**:

Participants will engage in the close reading of a poem in order to develop their understanding of craft. Through a scaffolded series of discussions, examples, and writing, participants will be able to describe an author’s craft choices and begin to make craft decisions in their own writing.

**Materials**: *Ashore* by Laurel Nakanishi, White board and Dry-erase markers.

*Note*: It may be helpful if participants read the target poem, “Invoking the Bodhisattva’s Names in Honolulu,” ahead of time.

**The Lesson**

**Mini-Lecture: Introduction to Poetry and Craft**

There are so many different types of poetry, it can sometimes be difficult to define what a poem is. Yet, instead of trying to sum up all of poetry in a definition, it may be more useful to focus on what poetry *does*. Here are some characteristics:

* + Poetry plays with the sound and rhythm in words, much like music.
  + Poetry often focuses the mind on one moment, as opposed to stories and novels that have more space to wander.
  + Poetry pays close attention to the precision of language. Often poems are condensed (short). Each word counts and holds weight.
  + There are elements of form and structure that poets play with: lines, stanzas, and visual presentation. There are also formal structures like sonnets and villanelles. Poems can be literary or narrative or performative (like slam poetry).
  + One of the most important things about poetry is that is pays attention to the world and helps readers to focus in and pay attention, too.

When discussing poetry (or any type of writing, really) it is important to look at craft. Craft is how a poem is put together. Looking at craft is like opening up a panel and gazing into the cogs, and belts, and engines inside. When examining the craft of a poem, ask yourself: What tools does the poet employ? What is the effect of a poem and how does the writer accomplish this? As a writer, it is important to read with an eye on craft because you may encounter something that you would like to borrow and evolve in your own work.

**Discussion Activity: Close Reading**

Instructions: In groups of three, participants read the poem “Invoking the Bodhisattva’s Names in Honolulu” twice, once silently to themselves and once out loud. Then, ask participants to discuss their observations of what it is happening in the poem (for now, they are to refrain from interpretation or judgment). As the groups discuss, one person in each group should take notes. After the groups finish their discussion, ask the note-takers to come up to the white board and write one or two words about their group’s responses to the questions. By the end of the period, participants will create a mural-like “Word Wall.” Review the group’s response by summarizing the Word Wall.

Questions:

* + What happens in this poem? Give a literal summary of the plot. Be specific.
  + Who is speaking? What do we know about them? Is there more than one speaker?
  + Where is the speaker (literally or emotionally)? In a city? In love?
  + Is there someone being address? Is there a “you”?
  + What time is it? What season, century, time of day?

(*Note*: it may be helpful to project these questions or pass out copies)

Instructions: Ask participants to discuss their interpretation of the poem, paying particular attention to craft. A new note taker will annotate the conversation. After the groups finish their discussion, ask the note-takers to come up to the white board and write one or two words about their group’s discussion. By the end of the period, participants will create a mural-like “Word Wall.” Review the group’s response by talking through and summarizing the Word Wall.

Questions:

* Follow the poem’s imagery. What are the specific images? How do they relate?
* What changes or transformations occur by the end of the poem?
* What is the central conflict?
* What holds this poem together (how are things connected)? Sound? Meter and form? Narrative (story)? Logic? Image?

(*Note*: it may be helpful to project these questions or pass out copies)

**Writing Activity: Writing Home**

Instructions: Ask participants to choose between these two writing prompts. The first prompt focuses on condensation and is good for participants who are just beginning to write poetry. The second prompt is more advanced. After participants write, encourage them to share with partners or the entire group. After participants share, choose one specific element of craft to identify and compliment in their poem.

Prompts:

1. Write a half page description of one specific place that you associate with “home” – you could choose a childhood park, or a particular tree near your house, etc. Describe this place in one long paragraph. Then describe this place in 7 sentences. Then describe this place in one line. Try to use specific, concrete details to describe your location.
2. Write a poem that takes readers on a walking tour through your neighborhood. Include locations that are important to you and your community. What sorts of forgotten or overlooked things do you want readers to pay attention to? Try to use specific, concrete details to describe your neighborhood.

**Imagery**

**Age Group**: Middle School, High School, College, and beyond

**Subject(s):** Language Arts – Poetry and Creative Writing

**Time Required**: 45-60 minutes

**Lesson Overview**:

**Materials**: *Ashore* by Laurel Nakanishi, Plain paper, Colored pens, Tape

*Note*: It may be helpful if participants read the target poem, “Mahalo ā nui,” ahead of time.

**The Lesson**

**Mini-Lecture:** **Imagery and Figurative Language**

Imagery is descriptive language that deals with any of the five senses (sight, touch, smell, hearing, taste). An “image” in a poem is a description that is so vivid, it evokes a picture in the reader’s mind. While we normally think of images as innately visual, images in poetry can evoke a smell, sound, taste, or tactile sensation. Images are the building blocks of poetry. If writers want to create an emotional reaction in readers, they must find a combination of images, objects, or descriptions that evoke the appropriate emotion. It is not enough to say, “Love is great,” or “Death is sad.” Instead, emotions are portrayed through images and scenes.

**Discussion: Imagery in Action**

Instructions: In groups of three, participants read the poem “Mahalo ā nui” twice, once silently to themselves and once out loud. Then, ask participants to identify and underline the central images of the poem. Remind participants that images can evoke any of the senses. Then, ask groups to choose their favorite image and draw it on a piece of paper. Encourage groups to include all of the details from the description in their picture. As groups finish, tape the pictures to the wall and have participants walk around this “gallery of images”

**Writing Activity: Imagery Practice**

Instructions: In order to practice the emotional dimension of imagery creation, ask participants to choose one of the following objects: train, streetlight, stone, tree, fence, ocean, pear. Then, ask participants to choose an emotion: ebullient, awestruck, bored, desirous, furious, delighted. Participants will write about their object in such a way that it suggests their emotion (without ever stating the emotion itself). After participants finish writing, ask them to read their poems aloud to the group. After each person reads, ask the group to guess what emotion their image has created.

**Voice and Poetry**

**Age Group**: High School, College, and beyond

**Subject(s):** Language Arts – Poetry and Creative Writing

**Time Required**: 60 - 90 minutes

**Lesson Overview**:

Participants will explore “voice” in poetry. Through a scaffolded series of discussions, examples, writing, and kinesthetic learning activities, participants will be able to describe an author’s voice and reflect on the development of their own writing voice.

**Materials**: *Ashore* by Laurel Nakanishi, Blindfolds, Tape, Copies of “Living Away,” “Driving to the North Shore, I Imagine My Brother,” “Pacific Trash Vortex,” “The Shark.”

*Note*: It may be helpful if participants read the target poems ahead of time

**The Lesson**

**Mini-Lecture: Introduction to Voice**

“Voice” is the sound of the poet on the page. The poet’s voice is a composite of tone, style, language, and a multitude of other things including cultural, political, and social background. A poet’s voice is often consistent even as their subject matter, form, and speaker changes. (Note: In poetry, the narrator is called “the speaker.” Sometimes the speaker of a poem is meant to be the author and sometimes a speaker is a distinct character, as in persona poetry).

Voice is comprised of many variables: punctuation styles, rhythm, repetition, personal lens, etc. In order to develop their voice, poets read and write extensively. Instead of trying to write like another author, poets try to develop their own unique voice.

**Discussion Activity: Back-to-Back Questions**

Instructions: Move furniture so there is an open area. Mingle about using all of the space in the room. When the facilitator says: “Back to Back” participants must find someone to stand back to back with. Listen to the question (see below). Turn and share. After sharing, ask participants to say thank you and move on. Repeat.

Questions:

* When we talk about an author’s voice, what do we mean?
* Is *voice* different from *style*?
* Is *voice* different from *persona*?

**Reading and Discussion Activity: Gallery of Voices**

Preparation: Before class, facilitator tapes up copies of the following poems (one poem per wall): “Living Away,” “Driving to the North Shore, I Imagine My Brother,” “Pacific Trash Vortex,” “The Shark.”

Instructions: Participants walk around the room and review the poems. Then, the facilitator prompts them to stand next to a poem that they are interested in. After small groups are formed, participants talk about one or two of the following questions. Afterwards, each small groups shares a summary of their conversation with the large group.

Questions:

What interested you about this poem?

How would you describe the poet’s voice? Share adjectives and impressions.

What role does punctuation, word choice, rhythm, and repetition play in this poem?

What makes this poem different from the others around the room?

What aspects of voice are consistent throughout each of the poems in this room?

**Writing Activity: Self-Reflection on Voice**

As a group, brainstorm some adjectives that could describe a writer’s voice: witty, sarcastic, earnest, playful, spare, etc. Then, participants work individually to write down five adjectives that describe their writing voice. Participants share their list with a partner or the large group.

*Note*: Some participants may feel worried about finding their “authentic voice” or making sure that their voice is unique. The facilitator can emphasize that everyone has an authentic voice and it already exists inside them. Also, remember that everyone’s writerly voice is always evolving and changing.

**Hands-On Outdoor Activity: Blindfold Course**

A poet’s voice is informed by who they are and how they see the world. This unique perspective is developed by past experiences and the influences of family, community, and culture. In order to illustrate the importance of perspective in forming voice, participants will guide a partner who is blindfolded using only their voice. How participants use their voice (in giving instructions) will be informed by their position as the sighted partner. And how they describe what their partner is to do will be a reflection of their cultural/linguistic/personal/geographic perspective on the world.

Instructions:

On a grassy field, participants will help to place obstacles (cones or balls or bags) in a random pattern. The facilitator will decide on and explain the route through these obstacles. Participants must stay within the boundary of the field and avoid touching their partner. After dividing into pairs, one partner is blindfolded. The sighted partner must lead their partner through the obstacle course using only their words. After the pair finishes the course, they will switch.

After both partners finish the course, the group gathers to reflect on the experience.

Some questions to ask are:

What was your experience like as the guiding partner and the blindfolded partner?

What did you notice about your partner’s diction (word choice)? Were any words or instructions unclear?

How might your cultural, social, personal, or geographic perspective have influenced the words you used during this activity?

**Writing Gratitude**

**Age Group**: Elementary School

**Subject(s):** Language Arts – Poetry and Creative Writing

**Time Required**: 45-60 minutes

**Lesson Overview**:

Participants will explore descriptive writing. Through a scaffolded series of discussions, examples, writing, and kinesthetic learning activities, participants will be able to use adjectives and details to write poetry about gratitude.

**Materials**: *Ashore* by Laurel Nakanishi, Copies of the poem “Mahalo ā nui,” Whiteboard, Dry-erase pens

**The Lesson**

**Brainstorming Activity: Circle of Expression**

On a whiteboard or large piece of paper, make a “Word Wall” (a list or mural full of words from the group). As a group, brainstorm words that answer the question: “What are you grateful for?” After filling the paper/board, clear the room of desks and tables and make a circle. Ask participants to be aware of those around them and take care not to bump one another. Explain the rules of “Circle of Expression”: There are two positions in this game, “Off” and “On.” When the group is in “Off,” your hands are at your sides and your eyes are focused on the ground. When the group is in “On,” you will turn and take a frozen shape based on one word. This shape should be completely still. Please have both feet on the ground and do not lay down on the ground. Do an example with one participant: “When you hear the word ‘on,’ turn and freeze in a shape that shows *sunshine*… On! … And off!”

Choose active and interesting words from the Word Wall. When students are frozen in “On,” walk around the inside of the circle and generally state the kinds of shapes and expressions you see. Don’t make people hold the shapes for too long! If a word is particularly interesting you can ask participants to make a new frozen shape based off of that same word, “Think of another way to show ---"

**Reading Activity: Mahalo ā nui**

“Mahalo” is a Hawaiian word for deep appreciation and gratitude. Laurel Nakanishi uses this word in the title of her poem “Mahalo ā Nui” – which translates to “Bountiful Thanks.” Distribute copies of the poem and ask participants to read it silently, then choose one person to read it out loud. Ask students to work with partners to underline the things that Nakanishi is grateful for. As a group, discuss the types of things that Nakanishi mentions in the poem. How does she describe these things? What adjectives (including color and texture) does she use?

**Writing Activity: Gratitude**

Now it is time to jump into writing. Participants will write a poem about things they are grateful for in their everyday life. Ask participants to think about one thing in the world that they are grateful for. After allowing some time for thought, ask participants to share. Choose one participant’s idea as an example. Write it on the board using the initial words, “Thank you for.” Then brainstorm some more details to add to the line of poetry.

For example, many children will start with short items: “The sun.” Or “My mom.” Encourage the group to think of specific details and add them into the line on the board. “Thank you for my mom who smells like strawberry shampoo and kimchi.” Or “Thank you for the sun rays that fall down on my black hair.”

It may be helpful to ask your participants questions like: “What is that (thing) doing?” or “What does that (thing) smell like or sound like?” Ask participants to think of adjectives to describe a particular moment with this person/thing and verbs that will make the line active.

After it seems like the majority of participants have some ideas for writing, ask them to write a first draft. In this first draft, the most important thing is to get ideas down (don’t worry about spelling or line breaks just yet). If someone appears to be stuck, encourage them to look around the room and choose one delightful thing. Or they could think about their day so far and write down one thing they were grateful for. After most of the participants appear to have written at least five lines, encourage them to pause and read through what they have written. Then, ask them to return to their poems and add details.

Once finished, ask participants to share their poems with a partner or with the group.