

# Powerful Poetic Inquiry

## A Practitioner's Turn to Craft, Revision, and Critical Teaching

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*In this chapter Allisa, a middle school language arts teacher, describes her developing process of poetic inquiry into her work as a teacher. Allisa uses poetry writing and revision as a tool to help her enact a critical stance in her classroom practice.*

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The poems [in the beginning] are like a table on which one places interesting things one has found on one's walks: a pebble, a rusty nail, a strangely shaped root, the corner of a torn photograph, etc. . . . where after months of looking at them and thinking about them daily, certain surprising relationships, which hint at meaning, begin to appear.

—Charles Simic

### AN INTRODUCTION TO A STUDENT AND FRAGMENTS ON A POET'S TABLE

Ray didn't just walk into my classroom. His stride had purpose and a fierce determination to make me sit up and take notice, and I did just that when he plopped into a seat up front. I remember now how he leaned back in a seemingly casual slouch, but I would never characterize his personality as easygoing.

Hungry was more like it.

In my face.

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Yes, Ray was searching for something when he presented himself in my life.

I still don't understand why he chose to engage me the way he did. After all, to look at us from the outside, we are clearly different people. He is what some might call a "streetwise," African American young person with an attitude that can best be described as fierce bravado. I am a reserved, even shy, European American woman teacher. He is a teenager. I am middle aged.

Yet his purposeful posture was an invitation, something like an unspoken *Game On* choosing of me. The ball was in my court. Would I choose him back? Ruth Behar (2008) wrote, "The most charged intellectual insights occur precisely when one's ethnographic work and one's life crash into each other in a head-on collision" (p. 63). Ray had certainly captured my attention as I was cultivating my ethnographic eyes, ears, and sensibilities. He constantly acted out in my language arts classroom and didn't seem bothered by the consequences (silent lunch and detention) I administered for his actions—at first protecting my position as teacher-authority in the classroom. I remember thinking at the time what we had discussed in our Red Clay Teacher Inquiry Community: If I could only make sense of what was going on with Ray, I'd somehow be a better teacher. I wasn't expecting a head-on collision, but that is precisely what I got—and the tiny details from my classroom began accumulating on my table from which poetry would grow.

Toi Derricotte (1997), in her poetic memoir, *The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey*, wrote, "Every identity breaks down to some self that has to learn to live between loneliness and connection" (p. 78). This identity breakdown was a large part of the uneasy tension I found through writing poetry. Ray's classroom dialogue journal portrayed a young man in conflict. He was fiercely protective, yet critical of and disappointed in his mother. He was angry with her for the choices she made, and he wrote about feeling ignored at home. He acted out and misbehaved in class, but I could use his writing to imagine his actions as tactics for getting noticed. Ray even seemed pleased when our team called a parent-teacher conference to discuss his behavior. For 30 minutes his mother's attention was focused on him, and even as she shared her exasperation and disappointment with him in front of teachers from the school, Ray seemed glad that she was there.

Ray used his journal to vent some of the hostility he felt, and he used the journal to connect to me as well. There was a push and pull of trust

and mistrust reflected in his writing and in his interactions with me. For instance, he carried his notebooks with him at all times, whereas the other young people left their journals in my classroom. He did, however, write in them without fail, so I pretended not to notice him carrying them away. He seemed to need the lonely exercise of writing as an outlet—something I can recognize in myself with the passing of time. As I reflect on that year, I see Ray as challenging me to respond to him, to shift my teacher lens, as Deborah Hicks (2002) wrote, from the general context of the classroom discourse to “the particulars of the histories that give shape and meaning to engagements with literacies” (p. 145). Ray seemed to want acceptance, and he found writing as one path through which to gain mine. And the fragments of my interactions with Ray began accumulating on my table without my even knowing it.

### TEACHER INQUIRY AND POETRY

For me, as a participant in the Red Clay Writing Project Teacher Inquiry Community, encountering Ray was just what I needed at the time. I agreed to do classroom research—collect data and write about what I learned about teaching in my classroom—and was looking forward to analyzing my students’ home to school journals and doing some academic writing about my learning process. I hoped my acute focus would permit me to see Ray differently—as a complex individual, striving “not only for cognitive awareness, but for social belonging and identity” (Hicks, 2002, p. 145). It seemed the perfect way to try something new and write through my attempts at engaging critical pedagogy with a student I perceived as vulnerable in the sometimes unforgiving world of middle school.

Excited about the opportunity to extend myself as a teacher and writer, I was surprised by the firm no I received in response to my request to my school district for conducting classroom research. It was a disappointing blow, perhaps reflective of an era of high-stakes testing and teacher accountability that claims to support “research-based” practices but denies teachers the intellectual position from which to do their own research. A new conundrum emerged: How was I supposed to think and write about my teaching practice (do “teacher research”) without institutional approval? And yet on the other hand, the university IRB (Institutional Review Board, for research) that privileges

quantitative and experimental design research does not consider poetic inquiry to be research at all. Living between two bureaucracies, both with very different definitions of research that I carry with me in my work as a teacher, I moved forward with writing poetry and asked Ray permission to publish this chapter about him.

My life as a creative writer was flourishing, prompted by graduate coursework in flash fiction and poetry. If I could write flash fiction—short, creative fiction, running about 500 words—about my experiences as a teacher, could I do the same with poems? Didn't the task require the same heightened "attention to the rhythms of speech in communities" (Cahnmann, 2003, p. 31) and heightened awareness of interpersonal relationships and group dynamics? Yes, the exercise of writing poetry and thinking and writing poetry again could lead to what Rebecca Luce-Kapler (2009) called preparation for "serendipity of insight" (p. 75). Writing poetry was the perfect way for me to think deeply about my practice and do creative work at the same time.

While I knew I didn't need administrative approval to write poetry, I did doubt my ability to do the inquiry process justice. It was always important to me to make art through my writing, but I needed it to be credible in my scholarship, too. Elliot Eisner (2008), in describing the persistent tensions in arts-based research, called for "secure technologies of mind that will enable us to peer more deeply into situations that might not be the same as the one we study" (p. 21). This was my demand of poetry. In taking bits of conversation, journal entry, and classroom discussion, I needed my writing to reflect what poet Charles Simic described as an "epistemological and metaphysical problem for the poet" (cited in Zwicky, 2003, p. 2). In other words, I couldn't simply write cute poems about the things Ray said in class. I would have to let these lines of conversation linger in my mind, or rather, place them on a "table," where I might think about what they might mean in a larger context as I went about my day or even week. Then, when I felt ready, I would attempt to make art through what I learned from the experience.

What I wasn't ready for, though, was thinking about myself so critically. Poet and sociologist Laurel Richardson (1992) described poetry writing as an experience that sharpened her critical eyes and ears, enabling her to become more attuned to the lived experiences of others. However, the process had personal impact in that it "affected my willingness to know myself and others in different ways" (p. 135).

One day, after I completed a strand of conversation in our dialogue journals, Ray was on my mind. During our back-and-forth exchange we talked about writing—when we like to do it, where we feel most comfortable and creative. He revealed in this conversation thread that he wrote himself a letter every night. It surprised me, and I questioned him about this practice.

It was calming.

It helped him focus.

The more he answered me, the more I couldn't get the image out of my head. What made a boy so angry, so anxious, or uncertain that he had to calm himself through letter writing every night? I tried to write a poem to make some sense of it.

### At Night He Writes

- 1 On bad days,  
 he writes a letter  
 to himself. Says  
*the writing helps*  
 5 *me focus before*  
 I fall asleep.  
 What happens  
 if you skip a day?  
 You don't want  
 10 *to see that guy.*  
 I think about  
 that word—focus  
 wondering if it  
 really means *forget*.

I workshopped the poem among peers, and through the group I heard what I knew but wasn't ready to face. The poem wasn't done; it was just a start. There was more to be said and written than two little stanzas. Toi Derricotte (1997) says, "Sometimes people can't get past what they think they see" (p. 64), and by workshopping the poem I learned that as both a teacher and an emerging poet, I was not ready to move beyond my initial wrestling with the idea of a boy writing himself a letter each night. Perhaps Ray's letter writing was simply the tip of the iceberg, and maybe I needed to ask harder questions of myself

and of Ray. For instance, What made him so angry all the time? Why the letter, and why did he feel compelled to tell me about it? Why did his words haunt me so?

“There’s a very dangerous moment when feelings, real feelings start to emerge” (Derricotte, 1997, p. 122). In hindsight, I believe that I used my early writing as a shield against what I was trying to understand about Ray. Members of the group encouraged me to write more; they wanted to hear more and know more about Ray. Some thought the piece shouldn’t be a poem at all, but rather a flash fiction piece or short story. I rejected that idea. I would think about it, but I would stick to creative nonfiction in poetic form.

Even months later, I did not return to the poem as my group members suggested during workshop. I focused instead on building my student-teacher relationship with Ray. I did continue to write about him and conversations we shared, but I backed off that particular moment of inquiry. Perhaps I was frightened of what he might say and the subsequent response I would have to make. I knew him well enough to know he would demand it if he took the time to answer my initial question.

His words on paper, our conversations and interactions—they were all artifacts scattered upon a table inside my head. The first time I set them on that workspace, I saw them in a certain way, knowing that perception was unlikely to change if I failed to read or reflect further. Although it took a whole year of scooting up to, walking past, dropping new pieces on, and rearranging the piles on that table of knowledge, eventually, I was capable of seeing the “hints of meaning” that Charles Simic described. The work, though, of thinking about past conversations with Ray and writing about those interactions and then revising my work in a never-ending journey toward creating art was imperative for me to see differently. As Cahnmann (2003) wrote, while the demands of writing poetry are great, so is the potential “to make our thinking clearer, fresher, and more accessible and to render the richness and complexity of the observed world” (p. 34).

The same could be said for conducting qualitative research, so it’s highly possible I was not as afraid as I imagined myself to be. Perhaps I was in the natural process of inquiry, leaving the poem, fragments of my conversation with Ray, and the interactions that came after it on the back burner, precisely where they needed to wait, breathe a bit, until I had the chance to read writers such as Toi Derricotte and think about how her memoir informed my meaning-making. As it turned out, my

poem was “done.” It captured my wonder and worry for Ray, and while I wasn’t shutting the door on the possibility of revision, I didn’t feel guilty about leaving it on the table just as I’d left it a year ago.

But that didn’t mean I didn’t feel the need to pick up another piece of writing for consideration. The time and thinking space prompted me to revisit my other writing about Ray. In the following vignette, “How to Make Change in Middle School,” I tried to help Ray secure change for a \$20 bill so he could purchase a school identification card. He needed to get the change quickly because we were headed out that day on a class field trip. To save time, I sent him to our school cafeteria, a place I knew could help.

### **How to Make Change in Middle School**

We’re in the middle of field trip “preps”—last minute things such as the lunch question. Will they bring it or buy it? ID cards, too. Students have to have their ID badges when we travel off campus.

Ray still hasn’t bought one, and time is running out. He comes to class discouraged the last day out. I put my hands out, palms up, and ask, “So what’s the deal?”

“They said they don’t have change.”

“Well, just go to the cafeteria ladies and ask them for change.”

“I told you. They said they don’t have it.”

“The cafeteria ladies?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh. I get it.” And I do. The cafeteria ladies are notorious for withholding change when everyone can see the 1s and 5s bulging out of the cash drawer. I have figured out how to get what I need in their strange world, so I decide to pass the knowledge on.

“Ray. Here’s what you do. First, you smile. That’s important. Then, you ask nicely for a favor and tell them how much you appreciate their help. Next, while you’re apologizing for the inconvenience, you reach in your pocket, pull out the twenty—keep smiling—ask please one more time and then start telling them thank you for their help. They’ll give you change.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Sure you can.”

He shakes his head and slouches in his chair, defeated. I’m discouraged too because I thought he was ready for this next step. In

recent weeks I've noticed a sense of empowerment growing in Ray. All positive and exciting. Ray said he wanted to study slavery in America after we finished the Holocaust. Ray recently demanded more difficult vocabulary. He actually said, "I'm way beyond this," waving his hand in disgust at my selections. He would ask to repeat activities he enjoyed. I thought he might be ready to try his skills outside our reading classroom, but I was wrong.

I sigh and get ready to start our lesson, and I'm surprised to see him standing next to me all of a sudden. He holds out a folded-over piece of notebook paper. Taking it from him, I ask if he wants me to read it. He nods. There's a \$20 bill inside and one word on the paper—*Pleaze*.

"You want me to do this?" I ask.

He gives me a serious nod, pauses, then adds for good measure, "Bring me the change."

"I wasn't planning on keeping it," I say with a smile. *At least he hasn't forgotten he's entitled to that.*

With fresh eyes, I reconsidered this text and, almost immediately, I could "see" the possibility for something different. The piece, although it was short, seemed laden with unnecessary explanation that in my opinion, weighed down the learning moment I was trying to convey. In order for me to share my insight, it needed to focus on the moment and the moment only. This piece was a poem waiting to happen.

One of the most important lessons I've learned as a teacher and writer is that knowledge is not something we find at the end of a road. We read, we ponder, and we ask more questions along the path. It's part of an ongoing practice, what Cahnmann (2003) referred to as a "critical iterative feedback loop that informs ongoing decision making" (p. 32), and I can't help but believe in the potential of poetic inquiry as I continually attempt to write through my burning questions. What's odd to me is how fixated I become about answering the big questions. I don't really consider the little fires I either put out or start up along the way.

The change-making incident could have been a little fire, but I made it a burning question in that I thought Ray, through his growth in my classroom, where he was demanding more complex material and control over his learning, was ready to stand up and negotiate for himself successfully.

Such was the case with me as well with this piece of creative non-fiction. From a teacher standpoint, I failed to drill down to the particular act of making change and what that meant for Ray in that moment. I also got stuck in narrative form, and as a result, my perception never wavered from the general. I didn't consider the learning possibility for me as the teacher of a disenfranchised student. Poetic inquiry would have given me the chance to study this little oppression and perhaps learn something new through arts-based representation. Reflection brought me back to the table with new eyes, and as I've asked my students to do so many times before, I "found" a poem in my original narrative:

### **The Time I Tried to Teach Ray the Art of Making Middle School Change**

- 1 My hands are out, palms up—  
Expectant. Did you get it? His face  
falls into a pit of dejection.  
*They said they don't have it.*
- 5 They did, huh? The cafeteria ladies—  
Notorious for holding back the cash  
when everyone can see 1s & 5s  
bulging out of their money drawers.  
Hairnet-wearing women wielding
- 10 micropower over children.  
I sigh just like a teacher.  
Look Ray, it's simple. Go back and—  
Try again. Just smile at them. Hold  
the money out and say thank you, but—
- 15 Keep smiling. That's so important.  
They will give it to you. He shakes  
his head. *You just don't understand.*  
Okay. Have a seat, Ray. We move  
on to our lesson of semicolons.
- 20 A moment later, he is next to me,  
holding out a folded note—an offering  
on notebook paper. Opening it, I find  
his \$20 covering the single word—*Please.*  
I sigh like a mother and ask—

- 25 You want me to do this for you? He  
looks at me—hard and serious, yet  
vulnerable, as he gives me a single,  
solemn nod and returns to his seat  
at the back of the room.

Did I capture this moment and make art in the process? I hope so. Did I get the images just right? Probably not. Will I revisit the poem over time? Most certainly. For better or worse, it is my nature to overthink things. My writing is no exception. I'm constantly opening old notebooks and tweaking lines in poems and short stories, as I never consider my writing "finished."

Now that Ray has moved on to high school and I don't see and talk to him every day, I realize how important these exchanges were to our growing relationship back then. His requests, from help with tying his tie on game day to advice on how to secure change from the ladies in the cafeteria, were all seemingly mundane, yet they gave him something.

Certainly, they gave me something, too.

Carl Leggo (2008) wrote, "We need to write personally because we live personally, and our personal living is always braided with our other ways of living—professional, academic, administrative, social, and political" (p. 91). His statement could not be truer of my writerly and teacherly lives. Richardson (2000) echoed Leggo's words when she argued that poetic craft allows teacher-researchers to be "more fully present in our work, more honest, more engaged" (p. 924).

Thoughtful and honest engagement with Ray, starting where we both were, in our classroom with a single journal entry, presented us with the potential for positive transformation. Ray gained confidence to participate in daily life, enough so he told me a year later that he didn't write nightly letters anymore. "I just don't need it anymore," he said. I gained not only the courage to write about my practice but also the insight required to know that I needed to be flexible in my teaching and open and willing to change to accommodate the needs of my students. Through this process of using writing as a tool to become a better teacher, poetic inquiry enabled me to enact critical pedagogy.

I'd like to believe I participate actively in the ongoing process that former poet laureate Stanly Kunitz called "letting go and pulling back" (Kunitz & Moss, 1993, p. 13). The writing, workshop, and revision of "At Night He Writes" and "The Time I Tried to Teach Ray the Art of

Making Middle School Change” reflected this process in an almost cyclical model of interaction with text. True, there were pit stops along the way when I stalled and wasn’t prepared to listen or think about what a reviewer had said about my poem. However, through reading and thinking and revisiting the lines, I eventually sat down at the table and pushed on toward a new revision.

### THE IMPACT OF POETIC INQUIRY

As I reflect on the writing of these single poems, I recognize the impact of the workshop experience on an author in terms of writing process, but when I think about how it influences a classroom teacher conducting poetic inquiry, I am blown away by its power. I can’t imagine not having the opportunity to think about my classroom through writing. Certainly, I become a better teacher because I am engaged in the process, actively using my senses and constantly thinking about what I hear each day, but the real benefit comes from the cyclical nature of the process. If I’m reflecting intently enough about the interactions in my classroom to write them down on paper, then I make a teacherly agreement with myself to think these interactions through in a critical and creative way. I may not ponder them every day, but by placing my thoughts through poetry on a table in my mind, I commit to returning to them one day. As time passes and my classroom experiences inform my point of view, my perspective may change the poem. In this way my thinking about teaching remains fresh and new as I constantly revise, and consequently, with the process never ending, I never stop thinking about how to be a better teacher.

However, I don’t simply become a better teacher by writing poems; I become a better person as well. At least, the act of writing and then revisiting my words gives me that opportunity. It is a way to share what I learn with others; as Judith Ortiz Cofer (2011) wrote, “By reading and writing about what most matters to us, we pass it—what we have learned, what has shaped us into who we are—forward” (p. 86).

The review process is like a mirror, reflecting my attitudes, actions, hopes, and fears. If I’m serious about improving my writing, I have to take a hard look at the words and listen to others talk about how they make them feel. Then I must decide what to do with their constructive criticism and revise my work. After that, I return to my classroom,

often with fresh perspective and what Cahnmann (2003) called “ever-obsessive ears” (p. 29). From there, I return to my poem with new bits of conversation and understanding to add.

For the true classroom researcher armed with poetic inquiry, the learning never stops. As a writer and researcher, the words of Ruth Behar (2008) ring true for me: “There is poetry to be found in all human endeavors to understand the world. The thing is to know how to see the poetry, how to hear the poetry, how to feel the poetry” (p. 62). I am in my classroom with my notebook, looking and listening for it all the time. I only hope the writer in me is ready to receive it—and I take the time to rework it—and make art.

### Guiding Prompts and Questions

1. Allisa uses poetic inquiry—and the making of poems—to notice, write about, and revise what she discerns about her pedagogical interactions. How does the use of poetry change the way you think about this student, teacher, and teaching?
2. How might the practice of writing and revising poetry from the classroom help a teacher cultivate critical pedagogy?
3. Allisa’s poems focus on interactions outside the formal curriculum. Why do you think this is so? What insight might this offer teachers who want to have more just relations in their classrooms?

### Writing Group Exercise

1. Become a living movie camera in your work as a teacher. Sit in your classroom for several minutes and observe as many sights and sounds as you can. Write these down in specific detail. Later, review what you’ve written and look for hints of new understanding. Pull out the most powerful details and either write about one or fashion these concrete phrases into the beginning of a poem.
2. Find a poem in a memory. Begin with writing down a memory as specifically as you can. Write it all—what was said, how you felt, where you were, what you wore. This exercise usually yields 2–4 pages of text. Let this writing sit and return to it after several days or weeks. In the same way we may teach students to write found poems, read your text and pull out the powerful phrases and burning questions. Arrange these lines into poetic form, revising your work as needed.

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