Emily Dickinson: Close Reading

Grade Level: 9 to 12

Amherst College Archives and Special Collections

Developed by Suzanne Strauss, Northampton High School, Northampton, MA, and used in Grades 9-12

Community Partners: Emily Dickinson Museum & Northampton Education Foundation

Overview/Rationale for Lesson:

Students take dictations of two different versions of an Emily Dickinson poem, using the first hand experience of scribing the poems as a basis for engaging in textual observation, close reading and interpretive discussion.

Learning Objectives:

- Students will write from dictation two versions of an Emily Dickinson poem.

- Students will observe and discuss what they notice in the text, including punctuation, capitalization, diction and word placement.

- Students will compare and contrast two versions of a poem through partner discussion, a graphic organizer and a written essay.

Lesson Plan Procedure

Preparatory Activity:

Time: 10 minutes

Step 1. Ask students what they already know about Emily Dickinson and write their comments on board or chart paper. 10 minutes.

Teacher's Note: Students knew quite a bit about her, including her reclusiveness, sense of humor and prominent family. All these elements appear in the poem "I'm Nobody" (see "Resources" for link).

Main Activity:

Time: 60-75 minutes

Step 2. Dictate two versions of "I'm Nobody" (see "Resources" for link). 20-30 minutes.

- Introduce the dictation activity.

  Teacher's narrative: "I tell them to take out their journals and get ready to write on one page leaving the facing page blank for the next dictation. I talk a little about how Emily Dickinson's poems did not have titles and show them the Franklin edition and ask them to figure out how long it would take them to read all the poems if they read one a day."

- Dictate original version of, "I'm Nobody," including all text symbols   (capitals, punctuation, line breaks, etc.).

  Note: Dictation sounds like this: "Capital I, apostrophe, small m, space, capital N o b o d y exclamation point, space, capital w, h o space a r e space y o u new line…"

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- Students copy the poem exactly as the teacher dictates it. They write in a journal or notebook, leaving room on the facing page to write the edited version of the poem so they can look at both side by side.

- A student re-reads the poem while students check what they have written.

- Teacher dictates edited version of "I'm Nobody."

Step 3. Students work with a partner to complete a graphic organizer (Venn diagram or Comparison Chart) showing similarities and differences between two versions of the poem. 20 minutes.

Teacher's Note: "When they see a difference, such as the difference between the use of "advertise" and "banish," students are to write down what each word means and how it changes the poem."

Note on timing: Step 3 may be started in one class period and resumed/ completed in the following class, along with Step 4.

- Teacher encourages students to look at punctuation, capitalization, diction and word placement.

- For background, see "Major Characteristics of Dickinson's Poetry" (see "Resources" for link).

Step 4. Whole group discusses the two versions of the poems while teacher lists students' ideas on the board. 20-30 minutes.

Teacher's Note: "Students refer to their graphic organizers and report out to the group. I write the information on the board in either a Venn diagram or a chart. We spend lots and lots of time talking about Dickinson's opinion of what a "Nobody" is and whether she means "Nobody" literally or figuratively. Then we compare that to how she sees a "Somebody" and what category Frog and Bog fit into."

Conclusion/Follow-Up to Activity:
Time: Homework assignment

Step 5. Students write a critical essay comparing and contrasting two versions of "I'm Nobody" or another Emily Dickinson poem. (Read/download a Sample Student Essay — Compare/Contrast two versions of an Emily Dickinson poem — in Resources.

Teacher's Note: The papers show that students see Dickinson as being very creative. I generally point out, after getting the papers, some of the ideas that have come up - such as the use of the word "tell" twice and how that would make it a key word in the poem; also, the use of Frog, and how the frog is both public and private and isn't it great that Dickinson chose this creature.

Additional Notes on Lesson Plan:

This lesson was planned as part of a cross-grade collaboration between high school students and fourth graders entitled, "Emily Dickinson: Person, Poetry and Place," funded by the Northampton Education Foundation and designed in collaboration with the Emily Dickinson Museum.   See "Resources" for links to *Emily Dickinson: Writing Nature Poems* and handouts for "Round Robin Poetry Interpretation" and "Making a Lesson Plan to Teach Emily Dickinson."

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Materials Checklist:

Teacher: 2 versions of "I'm Nobody" (downloadable from Resources)

Students:

- Journal or notebook (with lined paper) and pencil

- Graphic organizer (Venn diagram or Compare/Contrast)

Extension(s):

Round Robin Poetry Interpretation (downloadable from Resources)

Making a Lesson Plan for Teaching an Emily Dickinson Poem to 4th Graders (downloadable from Resources)

Emily Dickinson: Writing Nature Poems (link from Resources)

Developer's Comments on Lesson:

"I think dictation is a nice change from a handout. As they're listening, they're already making meaning. It slows down the process so as they write, they're seeing what she did. They're actually doing it, too, just as she did."
-- Suzanne Strauss

R E S O U R C E S

Useful Links and Downloads are available at http://row.ctriver.org/?page_id=206.

CURRICULUM STANDARDS

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS (Connections to the Common Core State Standards, http://www.corestandards.org)

Reading: Literature » Grade 9-12

Key Ideas and Details

- RL.9-10.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

- RL.11-12.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

Craft and Structure

- RL.9-10.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

- RL.11-12.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

- RL.11-12.6. Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- MA.8.A. Relate a work of fiction, poetry, or drama to the seminal ideas of its time.

- RL.11-12.9. Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

Writing » Grade 9-12

Text Types and Purposes

- W.9-10.1. & W.11-12.1.Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

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CURRICULUM STANDARDS, cont.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

- W.9-10.9 & W.11-12.9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Speaking & Listening » Grade 9-12

Comprehension and Collaboration

- SL.9-10.1. & SL.11-12.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
    ◦ Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

Language » Grade 9-12

Knowledge of Language

- L.9-10.3. & L.11-12.3.Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

- L.9-10.5. Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

    ◦ Interpret figures of speech (e.g., euphemism, oxymoron) in context and analyze their role in the text.

    ◦ Analyze nuances in the meaning of words with similar denotations.

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