

Teaching Poetry through Multimodality

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1st Resource

Part 1

[Button Poetry](#) is a website dedicated to “broadcasting the best and brightest performance poets of today.” (Button Poetry, 2018). By using YouTube to present videos of their poets performing spoken word versions of their poetry, they bring poetry to the mass consumers by coming to them, rather than waiting for readers to make the first move.

Poetry has undeniably had something of a renaissance in the last few years, due in no small part to the work done by organizations like Button Poetry on popular platforms like YouTube and Instagram. Poets can now have millions of followers and find themselves on night time talk shows like “The Tonight Show,” where, before such platforms, poetry had been declining steadily in popularity for decades.

The website for Button Poetry is very accessible and easy to navigate. There is a toolbar at the top featuring links like ‘video’ ‘poets’ and ‘blog.’ With everything in one place, students can watch videos of poems, read about the young poets producing them (in most cases, people who are only a few years older than the students themselves), then pop over to the blog to see the latest poets appearing on talk shows. The poetry featured ranges in political anthems to love letters to impassioned manifestos about mental illness--all of which are topics of great interest to high school students.

Part 2

Button Poetry makes publishing and having your voice heard seem much more accessible than aspiring young writers might otherwise believe it to be. It brings poetry and eloquence and a love/need for command of the English language to the forefront and makes it edgy and popular. I would recommend Button Poetry to any Grade 10-12 English teacher looking to reach students through genuinely cool, edgy, intelligent, youthful poetry. With the knowledge so many kids have today of how to create their own YouTube videos, Instagram stories, Snapchat stories and whatever else, the primary medium of Button Poetry (video) will inspire students for sure. No longer do they need to feel confined to paper and pen to express themselves. Now they can make a video, share their words, and become heard--perhaps even famous.

The drawbacks of Button Poetry are, I would say, that the poetry tends to aim higher than the younger grades like 8-9. The subject matter often strays into the sad actualities of mental illness/genuine isolation, and the trigger-warning-worthy topics of sexual abuse and hate crimes. Many of the videos would require disclaimers before being shared.

When I was in high school, I discovered poetry as a quick, easy way to explore my feelings and to create art. It was far more liberating and easily accessible than longer form fiction and novels. It was not, however, until the second year of my undergrad when I was finally introduced to spoken word videos on YouTube--the first being the love poem "How it Ends" by gender non-binary poet Andrea Gibson. As a queer youth poet looking for community, I found everything I wanted in one place in less than three and a half minutes. Such access, had it occurred in High School, would have greatly increased my engagement with classes and my sense of belonging.

During my extended practicum, I shared one of Gibson’s poems with my grade 11s, and I had one student--the ringleader in an intelligent, but rambunctious group of boys--ask why ‘all spoken word poets were queer.’ I responded that they weren’t, and that poetry offered a platform to everyone to share their voices regardless of social positionality, but he and his friends (who wrote all their own poems as love letters to famous dictators) were a hard sell. That said, for the most part, spoken word YouTube poetry was well received, making Button poetry an excellent resource for any English teachers looking to reach students through popular, auditory and visual media.

Second Resource

Part 1

In 2017 *The Paris Review*--a notable publisher of poetry held in high esteem in today’s writing circles--[hosted a contest](#) to rewrite popular poems using only emojis. Examples included William Blake’s poem “The Tyger” as featured below. Writers were invited to submit the



clearest visual interpretations they could for possible inclusion in a future issue. Said contest, along with other examples like the emoji-riddled tweets of Carrie Fisher, bring emoji writing to the forefront of the popular

conscious, making it a medium that cannot be ignored in today’s classrooms.

Quartz [published an article](#) in 2014 discussing emoji usage in academic writing. *Moby Dick* has been re-written using emojis and re-labelled [Emoji Dick](#). Shakespeare has been

re-written as texts in [OMG Shakespeare](#). Clearly, text speak (including emojis) has become a popular, accepted, even respected form of writing. It stands to reason, then, that such methods of communication ought be included in the classroom. Preparing our students to be communicative, productive members of society is, after all, a (supposedly) large part of secondary education.

The *Quartz* article is the one I would like to focus on as a resource. In addition to the several resources outlined within the article (Emoji Dick, OMG Shakespeare etc) the article includes concrete teaching resources with various writing prompts such as ‘Back to school icebreaker- Students guess what emojis reveal about you and they write their own statements their peers guess!’ and ‘Get students interested in topics by posting in emoji why [they ought to] learn...the subject. Students translate the emoji reasons.’ Such prompts include both student interest (students love to write autobiography) as well as academic value (translation, multimodal communication, technological literacy etc).

Part 2

Strengths of the resource include the accessibility and range of the writing prompts and the placement of such literacies on the world stage. The prompts are accessible by anyone with a phone or tablet (ie most students grades 8-12), but inaccessible to those with no access to technology. The prompts and resources are fun ways to get students thinking and writing, and they’ll breathe new life into the classroom.

Downsides could be that they don’t stand too well on their own--ie. they’re not full-blown replacements for more traditional forms of writing, and they can’t fully replace texts like the actual plays by Shakespeare or the actual novel *Moby Dick*. They can, however, give students an entry point into to these works. Parents and Guardians may also find such inclusion

of emojis and text speak in the classroom to be an unwelcome and unnecessary departure from more traditional forms of pedagogy. Complaints may be raised about what we are teaching our students and whether we are actually capable of providing greater awareness and knowledge for our students by teaching such popular forms of communication. To these people we can definitely retort that we are preparing students to succeed in the world, and that these modes of communication are quite dominant in the world, and thus, being literate in their forms is beneficial, but depending on the district, school, etc, such protestations may fall on deaf ears. That said, every opportunity I had to bring such forms of communication and expression into the classroom during my practicum were met with excitement and enthusiasm that equalled plenty of participation, and to me, that level of engagement is more than enough to argue for the effectiveness of teaching such forms of writing.

References

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