A Choking Rooster Sings: Poems About Teacher Transformation

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Introduction 

It all began when I set up a little research study because I wanted to know the impact of our Creative Arts in Learning program on some of our teachers. Five were from a cohort in Gardner, MA (rural/small town) and five were from Boston Public Schools (urban). In addition, 11 teachers who had completed the program in Derby Line, VT were interviewed once about its impact.

Using a case study method, I interviewed each teacher and observed her teach about 3 times in two years of going through the program. They filled out questionnaires after each course. The names of the principal participants follow the article.

When I decided to extract poems from these transcripts, the changes in the inner lives of teachers came clearly into focus. Their poems, selected and edited by me, became the heart of my written piece. My prose, which surrounded their poems, was explanatory.

But I wasn't happy with this. I personally hate reading prose interrupted by poetry, even though I'm a poet. So I decided to make “poems” out of my own prose. Through this form, this dialogue between me and them in poems, taught me as I worked and re-worked them.

Poetry is slanted, it is metaphorical, and it must be read more slowly than prose and with an open heart. I’d love to hear from any readers about how this form strikes you.

I want to know: What changed inside you as you went through this integrated arts program?

How did you shift and morph inside? And how do you describe your pretty self now?
The Choking Rooster Sings
By Chris Conner

During chorus class in 7th grade, the teacher was trying to establish sopranos, altos, baritones. She set up a divider, asked three children to stand behind it to sing the scale. After my group, the teacher said, and I quote, Which one of you sounds like a choking rooster? The other two pointed at me.

From that day on I mouthed the words when we performed.

I think it hurt so much because I loved singing. At home I would sing all the time.

I carried that hurtful negative comment with me all my life until this Master's program when a special person, Louise, changed my view and gave back what was destroyed 19 years ago.

She said Everyone can sing! We were never forced, and I eased myself into all the songs. After the two weekends I was actually singing, not mouthing the words.

Since then I have taught many of the songs to my kids. I even sing in front of parents
Eleven courses
in Creative Arts in Learning
over 4 years--
poetry, music, curriculum theory,
visual arts, arts and society, integrating the arts
creative movement, arts and technology,
drama, storytelling, integrated project

To Fill the Space
By Kathy Barrett

I. Coming to Lesley was a rude awakening.
Sitting in class, I was actually being challenged
to think for myself,
to come up with my own thoughts.
It was very scary when I realized
I did not know how to do this.

For a long time I sat in silence
observing
what was going on around me.
When asked to contribute verbally
or through written work,
I found it very difficult to depend
only on myself,
no one telling me exactly what to do.

There was so much room for me,
but I was very unsure about how
to fill the space.

II. Unlike what I was used to,
the instructors were not looking
for one correct response.
All my life I’ve spent looking for
the right answer,
so afraid I would come up with
I was called upon
to become involved,
to actively participate,
to think critically
and to be creative.

I soon discovered that people actually
wanted
to hear what I had to say.
My voice was being listened to.

The arts have stimulated not only my mind,
but my emotions as well,
involving
my whole person
in the construction
of knowledge.

Real learning has gone on,
and it has come from within me.
Predictably,
their lives were changed,
as well as their teaching.

What is of equal interest
are questions raised
by the process:

Can a poet be a researcher?
Whose poems are these?
Is it really poetry? Good poetry?
Why poetry?

I don’t really trust research.
There, that’s said.
A house of cards,
with one person’s data,
valid or not,
used as a brick
in building another person's new house. And so on.

I love being a poet. She doesn't sit for hours Poring over words. She wanders, she waits, hunts for an experience, opens herself to whatever comes along. The poet sits and sits, she sifts and sifts.

**In the First Person**  
by Robin Williams

I didn't have a teacher telling me about poetry, I had a poet telling me about poetry.

I had a dancer telling me about dance.

That makes a difference— a person’s telling you in the first person.

The teachers are real artists. It makes art real.

The poet wants to see how the arts hit them, how they were changed by the touch of the arts. to see faces, hear stories, eyes gleaming, voices rising with discovery, to look at their art pieces,
Two Selves
by Shireen Samuel

As a child, I felt I had two lives,
my American self
and my Trinidadian self.
I had to always remember the correct self for the correct place.
I did not want to be made fun of so I kept my voice under wraps.
When you feel safe,
I think that is when you create.

Unshackled
by George Milkowski

I enjoy dance, theater and so forth.
But
I never considered myself a creator.
They do that
and I do something else.
It wasn’t the piece of work we did,
it was what
I was going through,
that unshackled me,
not whether it was going to be beautiful
or artistically appealing
to everybody
or anybody.
The process I was going through
is what art is really about.
Whose Poems are these?
I am a poet who happened to be standing
in the way when a bunch of words
were thrown out the window like bathwater
and I recognized a baby.

Who is speaking?
Them.
I only chose and arranged,
brought to life.
A midwife?

"Metamorphic transformation, the interpenetration of identities, is for many still at
the heart of poetry" (Hirsch, 1999, p. 131)

Interpenetration sounds sexual--
their identities as teachers
penetrate my teacher,
my identity as poet
penetrates their poems,
Mary Clare, researcher,
put on the poet mask
as she searched the data.
They're not my poems,
but I dug them out of cliff walls.

Transformations
by Mary Gagnon

They said
in the beginning
it was going
to change your life,
and it really did.

I never had been exposed to the arts, never had the opportunity
to try them on for size.
Something happens
in the classes
that I'm still thinking
about
at twelve o'clock
that night.
I've become aware of and learned to ignore my inner voice that says I look foolish,

and just to enjoy the doing of the arts.

I've really reached into a part of myself that I hadn't reached before.

I'm more relaxed about where I am and what I am doing which has helped me become more articulate in voicing my educational philosophy. I do feel that I'm more creative. I actually apply the creative process, I see that it's a real process focused in different media.

It's focusing inward on what you can pull up. I see myself as a POET now. I get a lot of satisfaction
from putting my thoughts on paper
in a poetic way.
Each of my poems
feels like a little chunk
of my life
being set loose
into the world.
It is
very empowering.

I was able
to paint and draw
without being
self deprecating
about my work.
I just had a good time
without feeling bad
about my final product.
This was a
very new
experience.

I don't need anyone to affirm it.
I paint it, and I see a part of me.
that's all I need,
not somebody
to say
it's good or bad.

Singing, I'm much
more relaxed
than I was
--oh,
I say to myself,
you'll sing
even though
you don't sound
so great.

I considered
myself
awkward and ungraceful.

I always thought
I needed years of training
before I could dance.

Now I like the feeling
of moving in space,
of letting thoughts
be expressed
kinesthetically.

(I deliberately incorporate some movement into almost everything I teach now.)

I trust myself
as the source.
Outside approval
or even inner approval
doesn't seem
as much of an issue now.
I just enjoy the process.

I have always been audience,
always watching.
I enjoyed nice art,
nice music,
nice theater,
but now
I feel like
I can actually
produce things,
though it's not
museum quality.

It makes me feel good to do so.

Mainly,
this program

has made me feel

confident--

that what I'm doing
is OK,

not too weird,

not too bizarre,

that perhaps
I'm on the right track.
I trust myself.

IV. IS IT POETRY?

Uttered as prose,
words became poems
because a poet heard them,

extracted them like teeth
from a mouth,
laid them down on paper
in the shape of poems.

My process
a metaphor for how the arts
transform classrooms
because teachers
are transformed.

The poet tells the truth but tells it slant.
Speaks in “a voice”
other than her natural or social voice.
Strikes a pose,
plays a role,
reveals a truth while concealing. (Hirsch, 1999, p. 127)

Are they Good Poems?

I am not "in" these poems
and for this reason
doubt their worth,
don't recognize them as poems,
even though I have made them.

The poet wants
poems beautifully
and carefully done.
She knows how long
it takes to make
a good poem.

She is afraid
these poems
do not work
this way,
like teachers' doubts
when asked to create
songs or scenes or drawings.

**Winding Back and Forth**

*by Peggy Bennett*

The better you feel about yourself,
Dancing by yourself when you hear music is OK,
but suddenly you’re good enough to dance in front of people.
The better teacher you are
If you look at a painting of mine,
you are seeing
a side of me I can show you now.
The better you feel in the classroom
I never thought I’d write a decent paper again,
but I did, and I said, Well, you did it.
the better your sense of self is reinforced.
I hated my voice when I heard it on tape.
But now I’m trying to learn stories by taping myself,

The better you feel about yourself,
I’m a ham, and I can ham it up. Go ahead, I say.
The better teacher you are
I can take a lesson I’ve created and publish it.
I look at teacher magazines and say, I can do that!
The better you feel in the classroom
I shared my poems with the 5th grade class
the better your sense of self is reinforced.
I could have been an artist in residence.

The better you feel about yourself,
the better teacher you are
The better you feel in the classroom
the better your sense of self is reinforced.

Why Poetry? An Average Joe
By Chris Conner

I felt my talents were nil
compared to my fellow teachers.
I thought I was an average Joe,
I just didn’t feel whatever I was doing was good enough
to put on display or show other faculty.
I thought it was because I was younger.

But now I feel
I have
a lot
to offer
other people,

Once I do an activity
I'll share it with someone else
and before you know it,
it's going around the school.

I don't worry
about who's doing what
across the hall.

I realize if I look deep enough
inside
me
I
do
have
creative
resources,
and the children will benefit from them
and from me.

From poems,
will
the Teacher
Education
Accreditation
Council
know
how teachers grew from our program?
Will educators think poems reliable? Valid?
Will poems be at home
in the culture of evidence?
Will regional recruiters taste this research eagerly,
wanting to see which pieces can sell the program?
How will my colleagues see these poems?
Won't summaries
of what I found
make them just as happy?
I don't know.

I do know
poetry illuminates metamorphosis
Metaphor

Poetry traffics in metaphor, 
the only thing big enough 
to suggest deep changes. 
Prose's laboring sentences 
can't as easily corral transformation.

Poetry suggests, 
then leaves it 
to be filled in by readers. 
Garlic Press 
by Linda Newcombe

Basically the arts opened up my world 
made it a lot bigger 
and more fun.

It had the same effect 
on my teaching 
as well.

It's like a garlic press-- 
you squeeze it 
and all this great stuff 
comes out.

Poetry is a device for seeing 
what's at the heart 
of teacher learning, 
or anything else. 
And teachers feeling their power 
cannot be schoolmarm.

Learning to Speak
By Pat McLynch

In the beginning,

I was terrified to speak 
in front of a group of adults.
Then in Storytelling, Sharon said at the end of the first weekend that anyone who was nervous could stay and talk to her.

I said

It won’t do any good for me to stay because no matter what you say the day of, I will be nervous because it builds up with me, if I know I have to do it, it works on me constantly.

Sharon asked how I was going to be in my class. I said, I’m fine with kids.

I learned two stories and when I was ready I went across the hall.

And then I worked my way into third grade, Mary and Peggy’s kids-- their hands were flying up the minute I finished they wanted to tell me what they’d heard in the story.

And then I did the other fourth grades and then a fifth grade.

I felt like a celebrity by the time I told my story in five other classrooms. The children loved hearing my story.

I am often asked in the hallway if I will come back to tell another.

Reading and re-reading transcripts, forming and re-forming poems,
one day  
the titles of their poems  
on my floppy disk  
showed me the metaphors  
they chose to use,  
and they were  
metaphors of transformation.

From going through the program,  
becoming a better teacher is a given,  
but what,  
has happened to her?  
Not her the teacher, but her?  
Herself,  
her very self?

I asked, What changed for you?

They answered:  
I am  
Engaged  
Unshackled  
Stretched  
Reaching inside  
Stepping outside  
Pulling out the whatever  
Smarter in a different way

I am large  
Comforted by the arts  
Spilling over and stripping down  
Filling up spaces and gaps  
Standing up!

I say  
I want this and I fear this  
at the same moment.  
I am a little amazed and a lot proud  
I think…, I guess…., I am…creative
I Am Creative
by Itonya Dismond

I am creative,
yes,
I am creative
because I always
try to get myself
and the students
involved in music,
different music from Ghana.

The way I present myself is creative,

Teachers have to be creative,
not stick with one method of learning,
because the children are not one.

I Am an Artist
by Shireen Samuel

I'm learning to bring out
what I think
I already have
inside.

We keep ourselves from creating
when we say only
artists,
dancers,
or actors
do this

and the rest of us
are just meant to watch and appreciate.

That's just not the case.
VIII. RESULTS

Here's the juice!
Here's why I'm teaching!
This thing they are reporting,
is what I'm after
for other people
and for myself as well.
This keeps me alive.
Reach Inside Yourself
By Robin Williams

The instructors
make you reach
inside yourself.

It's very gentle,
it's very subtle,
but that's what's
been going on.

I realize what I have
to do for these courses:
I have to let go of control.
I have to be a child,
and if I don't,
I'm not going to get
anything out of it.

I have believed it
for many years:
first, the low-income women
in the projects of Chicopee,
our writing workshop.

Seeing them believe they were writers,
with something to say
and the power to say it.
Seeing them move out of public housing,
go to college, even get Master's degrees.
Seeing them reaching back for the women
still in public housing, and the children.
BE LARGE
by Marty Wakeman

When you take a drama course
and Stan tells you,

be large,

That's a different way of looking
at the world, to be large.
Not talking louder but being bigger.

It's not just your voice that gets large,

you start to feel large too,

It's a perspective thing that keeps popping back.

Before that,
studying ten women artists
working in clay, dance, theater, music, writing, visual arts
for my dissertation
how they shared artmaking
with homeless kids, troubled adolescents, small town citizens, elders.

I've been on this trail a long time,
and now I see in teachers
the same change happening:
the enlargement of the self,
the breaking of old definitions,
the belief in oneself,
the sharing of the new self.

Not As Cautious
by Robin Williams

Doing this degree
in Creative Arts
is one of the best things
I've ever done
for myself.
I’ve grown.
I’ve discovered another Robin
who is OK with trying out new stuff and not being afraid of what others think.

I’ve increased the boundaries of my comfort zone.

“In poetry, identities are in process, selves are constructed out of words, line by line, stanza by stanza” (Hirsch, 1999, p. 130).

And these newly created teachers are with many students in many classes, year after year, and they never go back to the way things were.

**I Do Wish**
by Mary Gagnon

I want for the children what I have described happening to me in the Lesley program.

I do wish somebody had taught me that way in elementary school, that someone had given me that opportunity.
If teachers can change,  
kids can change,  
and if kids can change  
education can change,  
And if education can change,  
society itself can change,  
and if society can change,  
life can change.

**Through Them**  
by Stephen Gould, Principal

In helping teachers learn  
to integrate the arts,  
one of the first things  
in all the classes  
is to help the teachers  
find  
where  
the arts intersect  
with them as persons.

They're so trained to be teachers  
that they come to courses looking for lesson plans,  
but that route isn't the way.

The route is through them,  
through bringing something alive  
in them  
and making some  
connection  
with an art form.

What follows from that flows naturally into the classroom,  
and with their colleagues  
because they have been  
touched.

If schools are going to be  
interesting places for kids,  
teachers have to be people
who are capable of being interested in things themselves.

Teachers baptized as artists--opened, stretched, spilled, filled, pulled and tugged into new locations within themselves.

They know what's possible, they have a little peek into what size humans can truly be, and down what pathways it is possible to go while we are alive.

**New Attitude**
by Linda Newcombe

The arts helped me form a new attitude:

I'm willing to try new things and appreciate things that are different.

Perhaps we need that attitude in a multicultural society.
References


Research Subjects—Teacher Transformation

Gardner Participants

Chris Conner, kindergarten
Linda Newcombe, kindergarten
Helen Deranian, Principal, Bennett School
Peggy Bennet, 3rd grade
Mary Gagnon, 3rd grade,
Stephen Gould, Principal, J.R. Briggs School
Pat McLynch, 4th grade

Boston Participants

Valerie Almeida, 4th grade, Dennis Haley School
Stephanie Cousins, 1st grade, R.D. Roosevelt School
Itonya Dismond, 4th grade, John Marshall School
George Milkowski, teacher, Lesley on-campus student
Shireen Samuel, 5th grade, Mendell School
Robin Williams, kindergarten, F.D. Roosevelt School