

# Notes From a New York City Classroom

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## The Five-Senses World

The round world has a smart brain.

In life there is time to think.

There is no crying baby born without  
Intelligence.

The round world has a mind to think.

Most of the world has the five senses.

The world remembers how it was made.

The round world sleeps?

The flower sleeps?

The sleeping animal dreams?

And sleepy me, on the round world,  
the dreams have awakened me.

**T**HIS IS A TRANSLATION of Homero Aridjis' "Poema de La Tierra Inteligente" by a seventh-grade special education student. I didn't hear much from this young girl in class; she always sat with the same

two boys, also special education students, never volunteered, and didn't often look up when I was teaching. Her first phrase-by-phrase translation of the Aridjis poem was barely comprehensible due to poor grammar and punctuation. Over a few individual editing sessions, however, we worked on arranging her thoughts and ideas in stanzas, and on punctuation. She began to smile as her poem took shape. I also was amazed to see a thoughtful poem emerge that showed more depth than the work of some of the more proficient students. I was impressed by her translation, in particular, of Aridjis' sixth line in the poem, "[*La tierra*] una memoria que se olvida a sí misma," as "The world remembers how it was made," and by the way she used quotation marks to suggest a new, speculative meaning for some other lines in the poem. For the title of her poem, she drew from our classroom discussions about how effective imagery emerges by describing the world through our five senses. When I read over all the student translations, I was surprised to find that her interpretation was one of the richer and more original, and that it stayed with me.

**H**ere's another wonderful poem, also by a seventh-grade girl, that was born through a process of culling from her pages and pages of free-writing:

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## Stressful

I feel like a hibernating bear, smashed potato  
 chips in a bag on a shelf  
 I want to sleep  
 Like sleeping beauty  
 Dreaming completely  
 About things that are not in this world  
 Let my imagination do jumping jacks in my  
 head  
 While I relax  
 But no, I have to get up and walk on  
 something that's hard as ice  
 So I take a deep breath, get dressed, and  
 walk out the door  
 Mad as a witch.

The student-author is a fluid writer who wrote a lot in her notebook in response to writing exercises—the writing flowed out of her non-stop, like water from a faucet—but she had trouble reviewing and selecting concepts to refine. The sonnet above emerged in response to a two-day writing exercise created by fellow PIO teaching artist Adam Wiedewitsch. We did this exercise toward the end of the PIO pilot project and were excited by the students' response.

First, we gave the students a copy of a sonnet (“Soneta LXII”) by Pablo Neruda, in both the original Spanish and translated into English. Students read the sonnet aloud in both Spanish and English and spent some time getting familiar with the poem. Then we discussed what they noticed about the poem and its structure. I asked them if they could tell me what problem or issue was being discussed. We looked at themes, similes, metaphors, and other literary devices. Finally, we looked at how sonnets are like essays in that they traditionally present a problem, look at the problem from different perspectives, and end by posing a question or offering a resolution to the problem. After this discussion I led a free-writing exercise in which students described a problem they were having and offered possible solutions to it.

The next day we looked at some of the formal aspects of Neruda's sonnet—i.e., that it has fourteen lines with ten syllables each, and that it is structured in the following way: *eight lines that map out a problem,*

*six lines offering another perspective on the problem, two lines of conclusion or way to resolve the problem.*

Then students used the material they'd generated in the free-write to craft their own fourteen-line, ten-syllable sonnets. At first I felt students were getting stuck in meeting the formal requirements of the sonnet (line and syllable count), so I pulled back and told them that the formal elements were simply guides and they should let the rhythm of the words and what they wanted to say dictate the line and poem length. At this point, the girl who wrote “Stressful” edited her sonnet down to its current form, which works much better than it did when she was trying to meet the formal requirements. The truth is that I felt we were not teaching sonnets so much as experiencing with our own words what we had experienced as translators. The students, after many lessons of translating others' work, were bursting to express themselves—to write. The sonnet was one form, one framework, with which we worked. But really, we were continuing to develop our skills as translators—now focusing on our own work. Students shared what they had written and defended why they made the choices they did.

I wanted to highlight the poem “Stressful” because it shows the same attention to language as the translations we had done earlier in the PIO process. The student author integrates metaphor and imagery into her poem, which is suffused with that elusive thing—the voice of a writer. How is this acquired? The process draws from so many sources that it can easily elude testing specialists and curriculum planners. It occurs in the space between something and something else—an interstitial space where artistic creation happens.

Poetry Inside Out seeks to bring young writers into this space, allowing them to find their own voices through a closer engagement with language. During the program our students became familiar with the act of moving a text from literal meaning (in the phrase by phrase translation) to poetic meaning of their own making (when asked to “make it flow”). From literal to figurative—and the space in-between—this is where the voice of a seventh-grade writer, like the ones whose poems are featured here, finds room to grow. 🗨️