

Poems That Leap Off the Page

Creating Three-Dimensional Poetry Projects in the Classroom

DANIEL GODSTON

When Teachers & Writers published Dave Morice's The Adventures of Dr. Alphabet twelve years ago, it became an instant classic. Below, teacher and writer Daniel Godston shows us why when he describes the successful and off-beat Morice-inspired exercises he has conducted with his students over the years. — Editor

HELPING YOUNG POETS LEARN to make inventive connections between poetry and other art forms has been the focus of my work with students in the Chicago Public Schools over the past few years. Combining poetry with art forms such as painting, collage, sculpture, and musical instrument building has enhanced my students' understanding of the creative process, enlivened their social studies and language arts curriculum, and resulted in the creation of exciting artworks, including poetry robots, poetry chairs, and poetry rainsticks, which my students proudly display in our school classrooms and hallways. Much of the inspiration for these projects came from Dave Morice's *The Adventures of Dr. Alphabet*—that fathomless wellspring of poetry project ideas.

Something happens in the creative process when you ask students to imagine their poems as part of a larger work of art, not just as words on paper. Allen Ginsberg once wrote that the dimensions of the paper upon which a poem is written affect line lengths: a big piece of paper inspires long lines, and a small piece of paper inspires short lines. While waiting between seeing patients, William Carlos Williams used to type poems on drug prescription sheets. When I teach three-dimensional poetry, I make the assumption that writing directly on a surface that is lumpy, curved, or scratchy might also influence what is written.

In their book *Third Mind: Creative Writing Through Visual Art*, Tanya Foster and Kristin Prevallet write of a particular illumination that can come when art forms “speak” across the boundaries that separate them:

Listening to works of art and participating in a conversation with them can produce exciting and shifting responses in each of us: poems, stories, self-portraits, essays, and other creative works are generated that “talk back” to the visual stimulus. This is what William Burroughs called the “third mind.” The third mind, to cite . . . Anne Waldman, is a state in which “something new, or ‘other,’ emerges from the combination that would not have come about with a solo act.” (Foster and Prevallet, xv)

Asking students to create poetry within a larger context that involves other art forms—such as sculpture, painting, and music—can inspire them to think of their writing in new ways. An engaging poem might be combined with music to be transformed into a song lyric, for instance, or become the inspiration for a drawing or sculpture. In *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*, Dick Higgins writes about “an ongoing human wish to combine the visual and literary impulses, to tie together the experience of these two areas into an aesthetic whole” (Higgins 3). Exploring this wish has allowed my students to create exciting and challenging poetry that leaps off the page—not just in readers’ minds—but into public spaces as well. And when poetry becomes part of a sculpture in a public space, it sends a message to young poets and other people that poetry can and should deserve more public attention. What follows are descriptions of three of the projects I did with my students, along with examples of their work.

Poetry Robot Projects

THE Poetry Robot Project happened at Taft High School and Burbank Elementary School during the 2003–2005 school years, while I was poet-in-residence through The Poetry Center of Chicago’s Hands on Stanzas Program, and the idea first came from Dave Morice’s *The Adventures of Dr. Alphabet*. At Taft High School I worked with Mrs. Asvos’, Mrs. Pauly’s, and Ms. Ko’s students, and we started by talking about what a robot is, and what it does and doesn’t do. We read an excerpt of the dialogue from “The Lonely” *Twilight Zone* episode and talked about what is happening in it. We brainstormed a list of robot-related words, and two student helpers wrote those words on the board. I passed around photos of toy robots copied from *Robots and Spaceships*: a robot in a “Space Patrol” race car; a cone-headed blue robot with Robby the Robot-style arms and legs; a blue, red, and yellow mechanical wind-up Atomic Robot; a battery operated “Moon Explorer” with claw hands, a red tractor beam that comes out of its forehead, and diamond-shaped antenna; and so on. After we had talked and thought about robots for a while, I asked the students to write robot poems, and gave them the following prompts to use if they needed help getting started:

You are a robot. How old are you? What kinds of things have you done? What do you think of the human(s) who built you? What do you look like? Are you happy with the life you lead? Where and when are you living (present, past, dystopian/utopian future)?

You are a scientist that builds robots. Why do you build robots?

What are your short- and long-term motivations? Do you see your relationships with your robots in a Prometheus/Frankenstein way?

You have your own personal robot. What does it do? What happens when your robot gets "sick"? What chores does your robot perform? Is your robot consistently obedient, or sometimes disobedient? What do you do when your robot gives you an attitude? Does your robot do your homework? If so, how do you know your robot is doing it right? Do you ever use your robot as an alibi or alter ego? What if you had a robot that was your doppelgänger?

I also gave them a list of "robot vocabulary" and asked that each poem include five of the robot-related words.

Here are several robot poems that Taft High School students wrote:

Robot Poem

COLLEEN (ninth grade)

On, eat, grab, go,
receive, leave, off.
On weekdays we are all like robots.
We do the same thing everyday.
On and Off, On and Off.
Only on weekends do our human parts show.
Otherwise it's what we are programmed to do.
On and Off, On and Off.
We go to work or school,
and do our jobs without even thinking.
On and Off, On and Off.
We are all numbers
until we speak up and stand for a person.
On and Off.

Tooth and Cog

T. C. (seventh grade)

Clank, clank, auto gyro—
click, click, processing.
Machines rule.
Metal moves, never stopping—

flying nuts, bolts, buttons,
and cogs, as a gloomy metal haze covers the earth.
Automatons, levers, destroyers—
a crazy mixed up, oily world.

Treads roll aimlessly as camels,
as a mechanical dystopia engulfs the world.

24/7 working life of lifelessness comes about every day,
killing life to improve the lives of machines.

What was made to help now is the maker and unmaker—
we are the laborers and they are the masters.
Life is a joke and cogs are better fit
to rule over humans—

Totally backwards world,
blind leading blind, and
slavery is freedom.
Why can't it just rain?

Students at Burbank Elementary School worked on a similar poetry robot project. Here are some haiku they wrote:

Robot Haiku

ANDREW (seventh grade)

Climb Kilimanjaro,
O robot,
but faster, faster.

Andrew's haiku is inspired by a haiku by Kobayashi Issa, which goes, "Climb Mount Fuji, / oh snail, / but slowly, slowly" (translated by Robert Hass).

Robot Haiku

DANIEL (seventh grade)

Gears move with a thought.
Machines take over our
planet. We are doomed.

Once my students had written their robot poems, we got to work in groups designing and building our poetry robots. We had collected cardboard boxes and a bunch of pieces of construction paper, and the students found that the shapes of the different cardboard boxes suggested certain robot shapes. Some groups made robots with legs, others had claws with boxy bodies. Students used pastels and magic markers to draw features on the robots' faces and appendages. Then, once they'd revised their robot poems, the students glued them onto the poetry robots.

We brainstormed places where the poetry robots should be displayed. Should we leave them in the classrooms, put them in the hallways, or propose to have them perched in one of Taft's display cases, next to the sports tournament trophies? We decided that leaving them in the hallway wouldn't be a good idea (they could easily get damaged), and having them put in one of the display cases didn't seem feasible. Mrs. Asvos suggested we haul the poetry robots down to the library. I talked to the librarians, who

okayed this idea. Now, one of the Taft poetry robots stands right inside the front door of the library, right by the machine that beeps if you start walking out of the library with a book that hasn't been checked out yet.

Poetry Chair Project

I did this project with students at Sabin Magnet School, Burbank Elementary School, and Taft High School, but here I will focus on the poetry chair project that happened at Taft High School in May 2004. Thanks again to Dave Morice for another thinking-outside-the-box (or on-top-of-the-chair) idea.

To begin, I bought a heavy steel chair with a beige vinyl-upholstered seat at a Salvation Army store, and then spray painted the chair green. I brought the chair to Ms. Asvos' classroom at Taft, along with several back issues of *National Geographic*, and had the students collage pictures from the magazine onto the chair's surface.

Once our chair was decorated, I then gave the young poets these two prompts: What kinds of things do people do or think about when they're sitting in a chair? What kinds of things does a chair witness? Then they began to write their chair poems. Later the young poets shared what they'd written, and they wrote their poems on the poetry chair. Here are two chair poems—

Chair Haiku

LAURA (ninth grade)

Sitting there is a
Chair that rocks into the night
Shadows creep on by

My Grandpa Chair

IZABELA (ninth grade)

The chair has many memories.
It listens to people's problems and joys.
A chair is like a sponge,
soaks up everything that is told to it.
The green chair is often a witness

to many conversations
at midnight with a cup of hot chocolate.

The chair itself holds thoughts and advice
as it draws conclusions.
The green chair has been through a lot,
and traveled all over the world.

The Poetry Rainstick Project

FOR the past five years I have been a teaching artist through the Center for Community Arts Partnerships' Project Arts Immersion Mentorship (AIM). Project AIM focuses on the arts integration model. Arts integration is an approach to teaching and learning which proposes that using the arts to explore traditional subject areas can allow a broader and more profound understanding of those subjects by engaging a wider range of learning styles. During a Project AIM residency at Healy Elementary School during the 2004–2005 school year I worked with Ms. Guevara's fifth-grade students on a poetry rainstick project. Initially the plan was to bring poetry into Ms. Guevara's social studies unit. They were learning about Native American culture, and Ms. Guevara and I talked about the idea of making poetry rainsticks that integrated aspects of Native American culture.

It was Chicago in January, and we'd just gotten lots of snow. I had bought two dozen mailing tubes for the project and was carrying them into Healy when one of my students stopped me in the hallway.

"Mr. Godston, what are we going to make with those things?"

"Rainsticks!" I said.

I brought the mailing tubes into Ms. Guevara's class and said we would be making rainsticks.

One student asked, "Are we going to make snowsticks?"

"Snowsticks? What's a snowstick?" I asked.

"I don't know. I heard in the hallway that we were making snowsticks."

"What would you think a snowstick is? How do you make it? What does it do?"

"Maybe you stack a bunch of snowballs together and make a snowstick."

Everybody got a mailing tube.

"Have any of you seen, heard, or played a rainstick?" I asked.

One student said she had. Later I found out that Mr. Gomez, Healy's art teacher, had a rainstick in his room. We brainstormed ideas about what kinds of sounds a rainstick could make. "What do you think a rainstick

should sound like? Should a rainstick sound more like drizzle or more like a thunderstorm?" I asked. We talked about the range of possibilities. Then we came up with ideas for what we could do with the surface of the rainsticks.

Rainsticks can be made of hollowed out cactus branches (which is how many Native Americans have made them), PVC pipes, mailing tubes, and other materials.



Poetry Rainsticks made by Daniel Godston's 3-D poetry students in Project AIM. Photo by Daniel Godston.

Screws, pushpins, nails, wooden dowels, and cactus spines can be used as crosspins—to obstruct the fall of the objects to create the rainstick sound. Mailing tubes are inexpensive and easy to work with, and screws and nails work especially well as crosspins. You can put seeds, beans, rice, pebbles, and other objects into the tubes to create the falling sounds. The more crosspins you put into the rainstick, the longer the rain sound lasts as the objects inside fall.

Once the crosspins are put in and the ends of the rainstick have been sealed, you can cover them with papier-mâché, paint the rainsticks, and then spray fixative on them to give them a protective coat. (Be sure to do this outside the school.)

During the time we were making the rainsticks we were also reading and discussing Eskimo and Aztec songs from a collection called *The Steel Cricket: Versions (1958-1997)*. The students then wrote poems inspired by those readings, and when the poems were finished, they wrote them on their rainsticks. To complete the rainsticks, Mr. Gomez, the art teacher, helped the young poets as they worked to paint Native American-inspired patterns on them.

When the rainsticks were completed, the young poets worked in small groups to rehearse how they would perform their poems with rainstick sounds in the background. We talked about different kinds of sounds one could get with a rainstick—by slowly tipping it from one end to the next, by vigorously shaking it like a shaker. Each group performed poem/rainstick pieces for the class. All of this was recorded on my digital recorder and I gave CDs of those recordings to the classroom teacher.

Here are some of the poems my students wrote, inspired by poems, stories, and pictures from Eskimo and Aztec culture.

The poems below were inspired by *Nothing in the Word/Aztec Songs*, translated by Stephen Berg, from *The Steel Cricket: Versions (1958-1997)*.

Is It True

DAVE

Is it true
that one day
mountains will
roar and fire will blow
off the mountains?

A Sick Man

MIKE

I know a man, he is sick.
He cannot get out of bed.
He thinks he will die,
But he is wrong.
He will walk again, run again,
And he will thank me
For believing in him.

What Happens When People Die?**WEN**

When people die
 They fly up to the sky
 They live there forever
 They live on the floor of heaven
 They can imagine whatever they want


The following poems were inspired by photographs of Eskimo life, which we viewed and discussed in class.

Off You Go**SUSANNA**

through the sea
 off you go
 gigantic waves
 hide you
 down
 off you go
 far far away

Walk in the U.S.A.**ADA**

I can't walk in the sea
 Like a gigantic ship.
 I could pay and ride a ship
 But I don't have any money.
 He goes and goes
 To America.

It is exciting and rewarding to help young people work on projects that combine poetry with other art forms. These projects shine a light on the creative possibilities of language and the inspirational power of art, and give students a concrete way to see and understand the myriad connections among the things they are learning in school. Students also come to see how they can evolve as creative individuals. And every time people encounter these creations in public spaces, they can hear the voices of the young poets who created them declaring that they have something to say, that their creative responses to what is being taught have value and power. It is my hope that my students will carry what they have been learning through these experiences into other creative endeavors throughout their lives. 

Bibliography and Suggested Resources

Foster, Tanya and Kristin Prevallet. *Third Mind: Creative Writing Through Visual Art*. New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 2002.

Gardner, Howard. *The Disciplined Mind: Beyond Facts and Standardized Tests, the K-12 Education That Every Child Deserves*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.

Hass, Robert and Jessica Fisher, ed. *The Addison Street Anthology: Berkeley's Poetry Walk*. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2004.

Higgins, Dick. *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.

Hirshfield, Jane. *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1998.

Morice, Dave. *The Adventures of Dr. Alphabet: 104 Unusual Ways to Write Poetry in the Classroom and the Community*. New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1995.

Renaissance in the Classroom: Arts Integration and Meaningful Learning. Edited by Gail Burnaford, Arnold Aprill, and Cynthia Weiss. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001.

Poetry Robots

Asimov, Isaac. "Three Laws of Robotics."

Collom, Jack and Sheryl Noethe. *Poetry Everywhere: Teaching Poetry Writing in School and in the Community*. New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1994.

Forbidden Planet. Dir. Fred Wilcox. Metro-Goldwyn Mayer. 1956.

"I, (Annoyed Grunt)-Bot." *The Simpsons*. Episode 322, Season 15.

Robots and Spaceships (Icons Series). Edited by Teruhisa Kitahar, Yukio Shimizu, and Terihisa Kitahara. Koln: Taschen, 2001.

Serling, Rod. *As Timeless as Infinity: The Complete Twilight Zone Scripts of Rod Serling*. Edited by Tony Albarella. Colorado Springs: Gauntlet Press, 2005.

Poetry Rainsticks

Berg, Stephen. *The Steel Cricket: Versions (1958-1997)*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1997.

Douglas Ewart's website: www.bamboewart.net.