

Using Short Poems and Drama to Help Teenagers Talk About Feelings in The Classroom: The Annunciation High School Ikere Experience

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Abstract

Most teachers of poetry in our secondary school still use the non participatory, lecture method of the teacher heaping his knowledge on the students which bores and make them loose interest in the subject being taught. This study uses two short poems “Of Days and Moments” and “Sometimes” as case study to demonstrate that students can concentrate to understand what is being taught, feel the mood and freely express themselves. The study which was carried out at The Annunciation High School Ikere, Nigeria, with 18 J.S.S.3 students aged 13–14 was hinged on Geraldine Siks’ process-concept structural approach to drama which advocates that students should identify, react, make up, manage, exchange a few words, and appraise what is being taught. It is supported by the Social Learning Theory of Albert Bandura which states that people learn by paying attention, remembering, copying, and being motivated. The experiment last for two weeks where students read the poems, discussed them, and turned them into short drama scenes with clapping, movement, and chorus. The data for the study was derived from classroom observation and a Focused Group Discussion. The findings showed three results. Firstly, attention went up. The repeated lines in “Of Days and Moments” worked like a drumbeat and pulled students in. This changed ‘voluntary attention’ to ‘involuntary attention’. Secondly, understanding of feelings improved. Students said “Sometimes” showed how mood changes fast from ‘high spirit’s cloak’ to ‘painful thoughts, red-embers-drenched’. Acting the change with body movements helped them feel it. Third, talking increased as shy students joined the chorus because ‘the speech handicapped may recite without embarrassment since he is not speaking alone’. After chorus work, 16 of 18 students shared personal examples of mood swings. The study shows teachers do not need long poems or big budgets. Short poems about real life, plus drama, teach language, emotions, and confidence. This fits schools with few books. It also fits teenagers who live in ‘days and moments’ and ‘sometimes’ feelings. The study recommends that teachers should be trained in the use of dramatic methods in teaching. Again, long poems should be replaced with short poems in the school curriculum for easy understanding and application of learned lessons by the students in their daily lives.

Keywords: Poetry, Pedagogy, Drama in Education, Emotions, Short Poems.

Introduction

Students in secondary schools do not like poetry because teachers do not use the participatory and student-oriented methods of dramatic methods in teaching. They still relied on the teacher cantered method of chalk and board (Iroh, 2021, p. 264) or simply dictating notes for the students, not caring if they understand what they are copying or not. The result is loss of interest and low registration for English literature in the senior exam. (Ugwu et al., 2017, p. 13). This loss of interest stems from

the fact that most of the poems are foreign with words like ‘thou’, ‘doth’, and ‘ere, thus making it difficult and easy to comprehend by the students. (Ogunyemi, 2010, p. 42). This leads to rote learning, (qtd. Offorma in Ugwu et al., 2017, p. 13) where students cram notes to be reproduced during exams. The student only forced himself to study to pass the exam (Adeyemo, 1976, p. 44). This leads to laziness and bankruptcy learning.

The intellectual maturity of young people differs greatly from that of the adults. They fantasize a lot and switch moods easily and are not always stable when they make or take decisions. Poetry recreates, reconstructs, recollects our life imaginations and emotions.

The words in poetry have deeper meanings than the face value. You remember the essence of the meaning after deep quiet thoughts. (Wordsworth, 1800, p. 12). For young adolescents, they need poems that talk about love and their lifestyle which match their feelings and emotions so they can flow with them.

The experiment was carried out with two short poems by Sola Fosudo, “Of Days and Moments” and “Sometimes”. They were purposely chosen because they match the ideals of the age grade of the study population. “Of Days and Moments” has 13 lines. It tells a love story using ‘day’ and ‘moment’. It repeats words like ‘saw her’, ‘met her’, ‘left her’ while “Sometimes” has 7 lines and talks about mood swings: ‘High spirit’s cloak’ changes to ‘painful thoughts, red-embers-drenched’. Both poems use simple words. Both use repetition. Both are about change.

We taught them using drama. Drama means pretending to be someone else to learn (Holden, 1982, p. 216). It includes role play, choral reading, movement, and sound. Heinig and Stillwell define child drama as ‘improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centered’ (Heinig & Stillwell, 1981, p. 4). The goal is not a show for parents. The goal is learning while doing. Jeffrey D. Wilhelm says, ‘through dramatization, students become a part of the learning process rather than mere observers’ (Wilhelm, 1998, p. 15). Siks acknowledges that drama has enormous power to awaken emotions through the senses (Siks, 1977, p. 11). This simplifies the lessons and makes it easily understandable and to recall lessons for future use. This is made possible

because of the participatory nature of drama which gives makes the children to be part of the buildup process of the drama experience. Again the participatory nature of drama allows them to feel the pulse which arouses their feelings and sensitivity making them to be alert.

The study lasted for two week and carried out with JSS 3 students of between 13-15 years at The Annunciation High School Ikere, Ekiti state. The choice is deliberate because the age bracket comprise of young people with strong emotions to test paying attention, understanding and expressing feeling over a situation (Slade, 1980, p. 105). Again, there is need to build the moral foundation of our youth through themes that pinch directly on their emotions for a better mental health. This will help them to circumvent anger, depression and broken relationships as well as reverse the World Health Organization’s proclamation that “1 in 7 teenagers has a mental health problem” (WHO, 2021, p. 3). Therefore, the overall aim of the project is to demonstrate the capacity of using short poems to illuminate classroom teaching of poetry through the use of the participatory dramatic methods which allows the student to perform, observe, do something and be active during lesson (Adeyemo, 1976, p. 44) rather than the teacher’s monotonous talk and chalk method (qtd. in Ugwu et al., 2017, p. 13). This method will build a strong foundation for the society to avert the society from crumbling.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses two theories: Geraldine Siks' process-concept structural approach to drama, and Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory.

Siks' approach says drama in school should have six parts: perceiving, responding, imagining, improvising, communicating, and evaluating (Siks, 1977, p. 4). Perceiving means using eyes, ears, and body; Responding means answering back; Imagining means making pictures in the mind. Improvising is making up actions without a script while communicating is sharing ideas with others. Evaluating means thinking about what happened. When a lesson uses all six, the 'whole person' learns (body, mind, and feelings) (Siks, 1977, p. 11).

This approach fits teenagers because they learn in different ways. Some learn by talking; some by moving and some by singing. Siks calls this 'integration' by bringing all types of children together (Siks, 1977, p. 4). In drama, the loud child can lead a song. The shy child can whisper in a chorus. No one is left out. Siks also changes the teacher's job. The teacher is not a lecturer. The teacher is a guide who 'explores each learning experience along with the player' (Siks, 1977, p. 4). The teacher is inside the work, not above it.

The second theory is Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Bandura says 'people especially children learn from the environment by learning through influential models' (qtd. in Nabavi & Bijandi, 2014, p. 3). Learning has four steps: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Bandura, 1977, p. 22).

1. Attention: The student must notice the lesson.

2. Retention: The student must remember it.

3. Reproduction: The student must be able to copy it.

4. Motivation: The student must want to copy it.

Drama fits these four steps. In drama, students watch others act (attention). They repeat lines and moves (retention). They then act it themselves (reproduction). When the class claps for a good actor (motivation), drama becomes Social Learning Theory in action.

Muro and Jeffrey call Social Learning Theory a 'bridge between behaviourist and cognitive learning theories' (qtd. in Sondang et al., 2022, p. 86). It means we learn by doing and by thinking. Rotter adds that we learn by 'observing and modeling the behaviours, attitudes and emotional reactions of others' (Rotter, 1982, p. 11). For emotions, this is key. A student may not know how to show heartbreak. But when he sees a classmate act 'the moment she lost me' with a dropped head and slow walk, he learns. Neelands' idea of 'metaxis' which means being in the real world and the made-up world at once (Neelands, 2009, p. 17) helped in the realization of our objectives. A boy can act 'she loathed me' and feel safe because it is 'just drama'. This safety lets students talk about hard feelings.

The theories are advising that teaching must be practical and participant oriented to actualize the full potentials of students. Drama encompasses actions that cover perceiving, responding, imagining, improvising,

communicating, and evaluating and therefore very apt to be adopted for this study.

Literature Review

This section will cover three main problems: text, method, and relevance.

Text: Long, hard poems

One the problems or challenges observed by scholars are the length and nature of the poems recommended for students in the secondary schools for WAEC and NECO exams. Majority of them are outdated, from foreign authors and uses unfamiliar words which make it difficult for the understanding of the students. This not only creates language barrier and loss of interest on the students (Ogunyemi, 2010, p. 42) but encourages rote learning and cramming of the subject to pass exams. To counter it, Bruce advocates that short rhythmic poems will be appreciated by young students because it matches the demands of their age (Bruce, 2015, p. 25). The above is supported by Akporobaro who submits that rhythmic poems associated with oral poetry uses repetition which is easily remembered to be recalled. (Akporobaro, 2012, p. 67). For instance “Of Days and Moments” uses repetition like oral poetry like ‘The day I saw her / Was the day I met her’. This is well recognizable to students who frequently use similar phrase in their day to day life.

In support for the introduction of short literary texts, Sweller asserts that short works aids the brain to be focused in understanding and appreciating the meaning of the word, rather than thinking of the meaning of the word and what it stands for (Sweller, 2011, p. 19).

Correspondingly, in a study of 10 line poems, Rosen submits that it promotes 60% of US middle school students (Rosen, 2016, p. 204). This is also accentuated by Oketch in Kenya, Africa who submit that teaching an 8 line poem with drums resulted in higher comprehension by the students (Oketch, 2021, p. 76).

Method: Lecture not action

Method is simply defined as a technique, process, and means of doing something. In a classroom situation, it is a procedure, practice, system a teacher uses in teaching the students. The two main methods are the participatory method which allows the opportunity to take part or be engaged in the teaching learning process and the lecture method where the teacher heaps his knowledge on the students without minding whether they understand it or not. In his submission, Offorma disapprove of the lecture method because it encourages ‘rote learning, memorization and laziness’ (qtd. in Ugwu et al., 2017, p. 13). Dramatic methods of teaching overcome the inadequacies of the teacher centered method as it increases imagination, innovation, understanding, fluency, elasticity, poignancy, firmness, teamwork and reflection through examination of moral attitudes’ (Iroh, 2021, p. 265, Hoetker, 1969, p. 192).

Dramatic methods variously used in teaching poetry have been reported to have achieved set goals. Process drama which strictly follows dramatic procedures was adopted by Matome in South Africa, to teach poetry. He acknowledged that students ‘spoke more and feared less’ (Matome, 2019, p. 112)

while Ansah used choral reading (another dramatic technique to teach poetry in Ghana and saw a 40% rise in recall (Ansah, 2020, p. 88). Similarly, Dunn and Stinson confirm that drama helps students ‘externalize inner states’ (Dunn & Stinson, 2011, p. 223). Role play where a student gets in and out of character makes understanding easier. This is because, the student is not the original character but only acting out the role. This leads to full interpretation and understanding of the role,

Relevance: Poems not about Students’ Lives Adeyemi says students reject poetry because ‘it does not speak to their world’ (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 31). Teenagers face fast love, fast loss, mood swings. “Sometimes” names this: ‘High spirit’s cloak’ then ‘painful thoughts’. This matches what Slade calls the child’s real way of thinking (Slade, 1980, p. 105). When the text matches life, ‘involuntary attention’ happens (Adeyemo, 1976, p. 44). The student does not force himself to listen. He wants to.

Drama and Emotions

Siks says drama’s ‘greatest value’ is its power to stir emotions through the senses (Siks, 1977, p. 11). McCaslin notes that in a chorus, ‘the speech handicapped may recite without embarrassment because he is not speaking alone’ (McCaslin, 1987, p. 114). This helps shy students. Heathcote says drama ‘uses the child’s natural language of gesture’ (Heathcote, 1984, p. 22). So, hard words like ‘embers-drenched’ can be taught with hands showing hot coal.

Gap in Literature

Most drama-and-poetry studies use long poems like “The Road Not Taken”. Few use ultra-short, contemporary, feeling-based poems. Also, few studies from Nigeria link Social Learning Theory with poetry drama. This study fills that gap. It tests if two 7–13 line poems can teach emotions through drama.

The Two Poems

1. Of Days and Moments

The day I saw her
Was the day I met her
The day I met her
Was the day I took her
The day I took her
Was the day I knew her
The day I knew her
Was the day I left her

The moment she saw me
Was the moment she called me
The moment she called me
Was the moment she quizzed me
The moment she quizzed me
Was the moment she loathed me
The moment she loathed me
Was the moment she lost me.

2. Sometimes

Sometimes...
High spirit’s cloak
Adorns your naked soul
Your mood, whet with joy
Glow in a chord of promises

Sometimes...

Warped musings
Assail and garb your mind
Painful thoughts, red-embers-drenched
Occupy you so awrily

Sometimes...

Summary of the Two Poems

“Of Days and Moments” has 16 lines and two parts, representing day and night. The day rolls into night and life continues. Part one uses ‘day’. Each line links to the next like a chain. The day I saw her - the day I met her - the day I took her - the day I knew her - the day I left her. It looks like a happy story: see, meet, take, and know. But it ends with ‘left her’. All the joy evaporates when he left her. So the days move from love to loss, from light to darkness, from day to night. The day brings happiness, while the night is full of apprehensions. Good mood brings happiness to the mind like a bright, beautiful coat. The joy sharpens you like a knife making you feel good and hopeful. However, it is not permanent. It remains for a moment because “sometimes” line 4, like a mood swing, it changes, thus marking the mood swing from happiness to pain.

Part two expresses Pain and Fear using ‘moment’ which is faster than the day. The moment she saw me-she called me - she quizzed me - she loathed me - she lost me. Here the girl acts. She calls, she questions, she hates and she loses. The poem shows two views. The ‘I’ acts in days while she reacts in moments. The joy is gone and it’s replaced with dark thoughts as reminiscences on love gone sour. The glowing, happiness disappears and is replaced with fear, anxiety, and caution. She saw a man who left her and called him because she knew him and quizzed him on why her left and loathed and lost him finally.

Sometimes” tells us that happiness can feel big and lasting, but sadness and painful thoughts can take over in an instant. And sometimes, there’s no quick way out. You just have to sit in it. It further leads us the fast nature of teenagers and how they take quick decisions about life and reminds them that life is ephemeral and transient, not permanent but changing in moments with sweet and bitter results. When we are happy, our soul glows and you feel hopeful but sometimes comes when you are down, sad and in painful mood. The message is we are sometimes happy and sometimes sad; sometimes your spirit which is high may reverse to painful thoughts as nothing is permanent.

Comparative Analysis of the Two Poems

We compare the poems by four points: structure, language, theme, and time.

Structure

The use of chain repetitions (Hornby et al., 2010, p. 27) in “Of Days and Moments” for expressiveness is evident as the next line starts where the last one ends. Again, the poet used action words like saw, met, took, left, called, quizzed, loathed, lost to make dramatization easier as the student practiced them. These techniques aided in the sustenance of students’ attention leading to the understanding for recall in future (Smith, 2002, p. 95).

In contrast to the use of chain repetition in “Of Days and Moments” “Sometimes” uses a broken structure. The intermittent usage of sometimes brakes the tempo and slows the pace but does not affect the meaning but gives

the students time to reflect, reminiscence and mirror the situation. This built in movement helps in the dramatic presentation and facilitates the understanding of the poem being dramatized.

Language

The poem uses simple, action and everyday language like saw, met, took, knew, left, called, quizzed which can easily be understood by a junior student without the use of a dictionary, thus reducing the cognitive load (Sweller, 2011, p. 19). However, sometimes uses high sounding words like “cloak”, “adorns”, “whet”, “embers-drenched”, “awrily” (Fosudo, 2004). Dramatic techniques break the high sounding words by doing and demonstrating them during dramatization. This aligns with Heathcote’s assertion that drama “uses the child’s natural language of gesture” (Heathcote, 1984, p. 22).

Theme

Both talk about change. “Of Days and Moments” is about relationship change. It shows how fast love can go from ‘took her’ to ‘left her’. It also shows gender: the boy acts in days, the girl judges in moments. This led to class talk on ‘do boys and girls love differently?’

“Sometimes” is about inner change. It shows mental health. ‘Warped musings / Assail’ sounds like anxiety. ‘Red-embers-drenched’ sounds like depression. Teenagers face this. WHO says 1 in 7 teens has a mental health issue (WHO, 2021, p. 3). So the poem is relevant.

Time and Feeling

“Of Days and Moments” plays with time. Days vs moments. Love needs days. Loss needs a moment. This teaches students that actions have speed. A bad word said in a moment can kill days of love. In drama, we used slow walk for days, quick freeze for moments. Students felt the difference.

“Sometimes” has no time word except ‘sometimes’. That means it can happen anytime. In drama, we used lightning change: smile then drop face at ‘sometimes’. Students said, ‘That is how my mood is’. So the poem gave them words for their life.

In short, “Of Days and Moments” is external: two people. “Sometimes” is internal: one mind. Both are short, rhythmic, and full of action words. So, both are good for drama.

Discussion

Our drama lessons had five parts: warm-up, read, talk, act, think. This follows Siks’ six steps (Siks, 1977, p. 4).

Attention

When we started with clapping the lines of “Of Days and Moments”, all students joined. The repetition was a beat. Beat brings ‘involuntary attention’ (Adeyemo, 1976, p. 44). No one told them to listen. The rhythm pulled them. This matches Smith: action holds attention better than dialogue (Smith, 2002, p. 95).

Retention

In Focused Group Discussion, 15 of 18 students could say all 13 lines of “Of Days and Moments” without the book. They said the steps helped. ‘It is like climbing stairs’, one

said. This supports Akporobaro that repetition in oral poetry aids memory (Akporobaro, 2012, p. 67). For Sometimes, students remembered ‘red-embers-drenched’ because we held hands and said ‘ouch’. Body plus word = memory (Siks, 1977, p. 11).

Understanding Feelings

Through role play, students assume roles that they are not but pretend to be. For example, when a student turns away from after being loathed in the poem, he crosses arms and makes a face to express his feelings of being scorned or not wanted. The feelings which come from his inner self is deep rooted and expressed to the recognition and understanding of others. This is what Siks calls ‘perceiving’ and ‘responding’ (Siks, 1977, p. 4). On the other hand “sometimes” teaches mood swing and adaptability of situations in life. It further exposes the good and bad, pain and joy, happiness and sadness of situations. Sometimes we are happy and sometimes we are sad. Sometimes, it is good for us but sometimes it is bad. Understanding of the mood swings enables us to control emotions and dealings with others.

Talking

The creative process of dramatic technique allows the child to interact with classmates. During choral reading, they read together and laugh together at their mistakes without feeling embarrassed (McCaslin, 1987, p. 114). This makes them to loosen up. Conversation becomes easy and the shy child overcomes shyness to talk freely and express

themselves. This is the power of drama as they feel safe and secured (Neelands, 2009, p. 17).

Social Learning

The use of the dramatic techniques turned learning into a social activity where students watched themselves act out scenes, understood the sequence and copied what has been demonstrated and were rewarded or praised for the performance. This is social learning which gave them opportunities of participating through paying attention by listening, leading to retention and storage of the lesson (reproduction) and being rewarded (motivation). The result became possible because the students were not docile in class as the teaching was active, social, and rewarding. (Bandura 1977)

Problems

Although the some words were difficult to understand at the initial stage, heatcote’s use of gestures came to our aid. Heatcote implored dramatic teachers to use gestures first before using words. (Heathcote, 1984, p. 22). This way the students became familiar from the gestures which have been practicalized to the words being spoken. Again, we gave out leadership roles to some students which made them to concentrate, pay attention to the process and procedure of the dramatization (McCaslin, 1987, p. 16).

Cost

We tried to save cost to avoid waste through meticulous planning (Siks, 1977, p. 11) because the experiment is self sponsored. The materials we could not afford were

improvised. Chairs and tables became drums while the hands became sticks. This got every student involved and active. The result is far better than the talk and chalk pattern of the teacher centered method (Iroh, 2021, p. 264).

Conclusion

The experiment was carried out at the The Annunciation High School Ikere, with JSS 3 students. We adopted the process-concept structural approach of Siks, which understands the developmental needs of children and individuals within the group. We emphasized on participation, which takes care of the multifarious composition of the class, giving equal opportunities and accommodation for the students to function optimally. The process makes the teacher to be sensitive to the individual child within the scope the demand of the creative drama experience makes on each child. We further adopted Bandura's Social Learning Theory. The theory recognizes that the classroom is a community made up of students from different social background who should be given opportunities of participating through paying attention by listening, leading to retention and storage of the lesson (reproduction) and being rewarded (motivation). The result became possible because the students were not docile in class as the teaching was active, social, and rewarding.

The mood of the adolescent is constantly changing. The use of "sometimes" tells us that sometimes they are happy and sometimes they are sad for no reason as they are living in "days and moments". This calls

for the use of short poems that talk about real life issues that directly affect them

The success of the experiment lies chiefly on the shortness of the poem as well as themes which directly affect the students, making it easy to comprehend than the long tiring poems with abstract themes (Sweller, 2011, p. 19). Again the participatory and improvisatory nature of the dramatic technique allowed them to the class lively. They turned the chairs and tables into drum and used their hands as sticks while joyfully acting out the poem. The repetitive nature of the poem was turned into songs making recall easy (Smith, 2002, p. 95).

Recommendations

The study recommends that dramatic technique which is participatory in nature and child centered should be adopted for the teaching in our school. Again, there is need for the training and retraining of teacher to use the participant oriented methods to teach in our schools while curriculum planners should adopted poems that related to the age and ability of the students, particularly, short poems in the school syllabus.

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