

# A Collection of gifts



Issue 19, Fall 2019

## Great Ideas For Teaching

### 19.2 An Opening Ritual

*Susan Herrmann, English*

I am a big believer in opening rituals for classes. When students can rely on certain activities to occur every time we meet, activities that reliably and meaningfully carry the students from the world outside the classroom to the world we've created inside, then the transition to a productive class meeting becomes smooth and natural.

My opening ritual in English 100 begins with an activity that can be adapted for other disciplines and subject matters. We begin with the reading of a poem, but a short reading of another kind can work, as well. For a few semesters, I used a book called *The Intellectual Devotional*, which had entries for each day of the year on cultural literacy topics. Page-a-day-type desk calendars on a relevant subject may lend themselves easily to this activity, too. The resource should have a wide variety of choices within it. I like using the anthology *Good Poems*, edited by Garrison Keillor; I've also successfully used the shorter *Poetry 180*, edited by Billy Collins.

Each student is required to take a turn during the semester of choosing a poem from the book, preparing to read it aloud effectively, and then reading it to the class at the beginning of the next class meeting. (One side benefit is that the student usually reads many poems in the book—sometimes, all of them--before choosing; I doubt that would happen if I assigned them to read twenty or thirty poems!) The student also prepares to answer two simple questions: What do you

think is “happening” in the poem? And “Why did you choose this particular poem?” Once the poem has been read and the questions answered, then the other students can make comments or ask questions; the student who read at the previous class meeting launches this part with the first comment or question. Once the discussion ends, we give the reader some applause, I place a post-it with the reader's name on the poem's page, and the book passes to the next volunteer. I prepare the post-it for next time and stick it to my roster, which makes a nice reminder of who is responsible for the book and the poem for our next meeting.

Why do this? After all, English 100 isn't a poetry class or even a literature class; it's composition and reading. Billy Collins made it his project as U.S. Poet Laureate to “introduce clear, contemporary poems in the nation's high schools” by assembling accessible poems intended to be read at the end of the general announcements each day of the school year. He aimed to make poetry a part of everyday life for the students. These are some of my purposes, as well. I want to open my students' ears to intentional, effective language use, and to save them from the intimidation of digging for proverbial “deep, hidden meaning.” I want to transition the students from whatever has filled their day thus far to a space where we have the communal experience of listening, reflecting, connecting to, and perhaps puzzling over a piece of writing that a classmate has chosen as worthy of sharing. In my classes, the ritual continues to a short daily writing. Sometimes the poem carries over into the writing topic, but usually it doesn't.

Again and again, students come to appreciate the poetry and all that it raises. The combination of brevity and accessibility of the material, of

# A Collection of **gifts**



Issue 19, Fall 2019

**Great Ideas For Teaching**

choice within the parameters of the book, and of a low-stakes, structured presentation makes this practice an effective transition to meaningful class time and community.

The Billy Collins' quote is from the introduction to *180 More: Extraordinary Poems for Every Day*. 📖