

Poetry: Teaching to Think

While paging through an 1894 Minnesota high school manual, I came across the recommendations for literature classes. Although it appears that students were expected to read many books on their own (and then present them to the class in twenty minute talks), the following list offers some suggestions for classroom readings:



As I looked through this list, I was not struck so much by the depth of literature, nor the breadth of classic authors (although both are impressive). Instead, I was struck by the amount of poetry these students were required to read: Tennyson and Goldsmith in the first year, Gray and Elizabeth Browning in the second, Keats and Milton in the third, and Spenser and Chaucer in the fourth. Add in the three Shakespeare works – which many consider to be poetical in nature – and you have quite the diet of poetry!

Poetry units are a small part of today's school curriculum, but they are simply that: small. Not the steady fare that the high school students from 1894 experienced. And the decline of poetry in the schools seems to be reflected in the minimal amount – only [6.7%](#) – of American adults who read it every year.

This decline might not seem like a big deal, but what if it is actually hampering the critical thinking skills that American schools are desperately trying to instill in the next generation?

In 2006, The Poetry Foundation found that over 50% of poetry readers believe reading poetry [increases their understanding](#) of the world and human attitudes or behaviors. As John Coleman notes in the [Harvard Business Review](#), “Poetry teaches us to wrestle with and simplify complexity.” Coleman goes on to say

that poems often take difficult subjects, condense them, and then describe them through a variety of word pictures and analogies. The reader is then forced to exercise his mind by deconstructing these analogies and making appropriate connections.

Robert Frost recognized this fact in a [lecture](#) he delivered at Amherst College entitled “Education by Poetry.” According to Frost, exposure to the elements of poetry – such as metaphors, analogies, and parables – gives students proper judgment which they can then transfer into everyday life.

Should schools today incorporate more poetry into the curriculum?

Image Credit: University of Oxford
