

Writing To Ourselves: Using the Epistolary Form for Reflection and Dreaming

Writing the Community Lesson Plan
Teaching Artist: Lisa O'Neill

Theme: Writing an epistolary/letter poem to our past, present or future selves

Pedagogical Goals:

- Students think about form and remaking existing form into a poem
- Students employ reflection

Description: I found this activity very effective with my students in juvenile detention. Sometimes students have been hesitant to share so I wasn't sure what their response would be, but some of the best writing of the semester came out of this activity.

Activity	Est.time
<p>Why do we write letters (or emails) to people? Brainstorm together on the board Some answers: to ask questions, to get information, to share about our experiences, to tell stories, to compliment or thank them, to express ourselves, to connect</p>	10 mins.
<p>Look at examples by other teenagers of poems written as letters (see below) and discuss together</p>	10 mins
<p>Write a letter poem to either your Past, Present, or Future Self. In each poem, you will utilize reflection.</p> <p>In writing to your past self, you might reflect on what you felt and did in the past. You can talk about people or things you miss or regrets you have about things you wish you did differently. You can also express gratitude to that past self for getting you here. Do you need to ask forgiveness of your past self? For what?</p> <p>In writing to your present self, you can reflect on where you are in this moment of time. What is important to you now in this very moment? What do you want to say to yourself right now? What words do you most need to hear?</p> <p>In writing to your future self, you can project out into the future of what you know you will be doing. What do you want to be doing? Imagine yourself into doing your wildest dreams. Or you can say what you hope will be happening.</p> <p><i>Notes: In class, I also gave students the option of writing to an abstract idea like anger, love, fear, heartbreak, peace, joy, etc. My experience was most students enjoyed writing to themselves and in particular, their past self. I'm constantly vacillating between giving</i></p>	30 mins

<i>students more options or more structure based on the group. Which is to say, this activity could be opened up more or specific (Write to your past self) based on the needs of the class.</i>	
Time to share with the group	10 mins.
Closing of the class	

Dear Past Self,

Thank you for showing me how hate is a double-edged sword,
 Threading each of my veins every time I take a breath,
 So that I now may feel love,
 Relieving and light, an exhalation of sunbeams.
 My muse, all I know is what I know.
 I've starved myself of kindness,
 Wondered when I'll grow into my spaghetti legs
 Or my shoehorn of a nose
 Or my pool noodle neck.
 You've taught me that I'm allowed to take up space.
 My legs are graceful, two tree branches intertwined and outstretching.
 My nose is friendly, saying "hello."
 My neck is elegant, a long ballerina line.
 I'm a swan beginning to soar, not quite sure how, but attempting nevertheless.
 Grateful for your appearance but adorative of your departure,
 Your Creator

Dear Fear,

You coward, you snake.
 You tighten your fingers around my neck til I can barely breathe.
 You promise failures and heartache.
 You speak to me in incessant chants, "Never enough," "Give up," "You might as well not try."
 "You will never amount to anything."
 You speak in a low insistent rasp.
 But I know you now.
 I get that what you want is not what I want.
 I know how to unravel the ropes of you from around my arms and legs and chest.
 When I begin to speak my dreams into the air,
 you come at me punching
 But when I see you and choose not to fight you back,
 you start to disappear
 You only have power if I have it to you
 And I won't anymore.
 Thank you for what you have taught me, including when it is time
 to let go.

Me

Dear Eagle Rock High School Auditorium,

I was a mere seventh grader when you were renovated.
I was afraid that the 90 years of history
Would be lost.
I guess that's the thing about theatre. It vanishes.

After just one year, I already loved being surrounded by the memories.
I didn't want a clean slate.
I wanted the
Emotions and
Work and
Honesty of all of those who came before me.
I was worried that whatever company the district hired to do the construction wouldn't see any of that.

But Auditorium,
You proved me wrong,
For although you now wear a lighter shade of paint,
And your seats are methodically scattered with the new regulatory signs,
You are a museum.
You are a time capsule.
You are a book of memories.
And you, my friend, are home.

With your twists, turns, corners, and closets like a haunted house or an intricate novel,
You never failed to entrance me and surprise me.

The shop:
A physical record of
The experiences from the
Past and the present,
Packed with set pieces,
Props,
Posters from 1970s productions of
Fiddler on the Roof, Romeo and Juliet.

The makeup room
With its eerie lack of windows
Where we tried to scare each other
And spent hours applying gold sequins to our faces,
And braiding our hair.

The costume room
Holds some of my oldest and fondest memories,
My first production in seventh grade
All the actors singing show tunes
And playing with the red mannequins
After the show.

Then there's the tall, narrow staircase
Leading to the tech box
Like the mystery man behind the
Mask

That very few get to see.

And of course,
The stage,
My one true love,
Where I said my one line as a troll in a
Christmas production when I was twelve.
Where I've spent hours rehearsing,
Where I've laughed
And cried
And embarrassed myself,
Where I found out that my favorite
Teacher was leaving the school,
Where I ruled Egypt
And threw shoes
All while delivering Shakespeare,
Where I got to do a monologue from
My favorite musical,
Where I had my first kiss,
Where I felt the soapy taste
Of artificial snow linger on my tongue,
Like a child fighting to stay awake,
Slowly fading away, drifting off.
Where I get people to smile,
Or to cry,
To get inspired,
Where I feel most inspired,
Where I am free.

Thank you, auditorium,
For allowing me to escape,
For letting me act like a kid,
Or a troll,
Or a queen.

Thank you, auditorium,
For the memories.

And thank you, auditorium,
For always being a part of me.