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Inquiry by design

Inquiry, Questioning, and the art of Korean Poetry

– Elizabeth Jorgensen

I learned about *sijo* (pronounced shee-jo) a decade ago, but it's a Korean poetry form older than haiku. Haiku poems are ubiquitous in American schools. The three-line, 17-syllable form introduces students to poetry and Japanese culture. *Sijo* is a logical progression from haiku: it is also East Asian, but longer, and can further challenge students to play with language, write poetry and share stories. Sweeney (2012) explains in "Poetry in the Making" that "*sijo* builds on what haiku starts. Similarly constructed from three lines, *sijo* lines have four parts allowing for additional syllabic legroom, instead of haiku's rigid five-seven-five syllabic structure. *Sijo* writers get 43 to 45 syllables to play with, so long as the third line contains a twist, a point of dramatic change." The four parts in each line Sweeney references are groups of syllables, as explained by the Sejong Cultural Society:

The first line is usually written in a 3-4-4-4 grouping pattern and states the theme of the poem, where a situation [is] generally introduced. The second line is usually written in a 3-4-4-4 pattern (similar to the first) and is an elaboration of the first line's theme or situation (development). The third line is divided into two sections. The first section, the counter-theme, is grouped as 3-5, while the second part, considered the conclusion of the poem, is written as 4-3. The counter-theme is called the 'twist,' which is usually a surprise in meaning, sound, or other device.

In my high school creative writing classes, I teach *sijo* to help students understand the forms and functions of writing; it adds diversity to my classroom as students learn about a Korean form of poetry. I invite them to participate by analyzing and questioning model texts before writing and submitting their own poems to a national poetry competition. Inquiry serves as my means to spur and develop students' thinking and creativity.

Throughout my teaching of *sijo*, I use the Sejong Cultural Society's website. They host the *sijo* writing competition sponsored by Harvard University. When teachers ask me how to dive into the teaching of poetry, a sticky process for most of us, I share with them "In Search of the Essence of *Sijo*" (2016). In it, Jang Gyung-ryul, Professor of English at Seoul National University, explains *sijo*:

Unlike haiku, whose sense structure is characterized by its attempts at the superimposition of one image or idea upon another, *sijo* mobilizes a different mode of presenting poetic ideas or images: a fourfold sense structure of introduction, development, turn, and conclusion. A theme is introduced in the first line; it is developed in the second; a twist or anti-theme is proposed in the first half of the third; and a certain conclusion is provided in the second half of the third. In this way, *sijo* evokes the dramatic unfolding of a poetic theme (pg.35).

Gyung-ryul continues by suggesting that while "haiku is a poetic form oriented to *symbolically* reveal the state of mind that transcends time and reality, *sijo* can be understood as a poetic form oriented to *allegorically* describe human reality" (p. 37). Gyung-ryul describes the essence of *sijo* by the "sense of reality" it allows.

Using Inquiry

As I teach Korean poetry, I want my students to recognize the subjectivity of art—that there are no right or wrong answers, no right or wrong responses. In analyzing winning poems, half the class will disagree with the judges' decisions; I might too. Yet, this doesn't remove the beauty of each piece. It doesn't make one any more or less valuable. I tell my students that it just means we prefer different things.

The students and I also discuss why artists create—to communicate, to connect, to express, to

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rebel. In *What Is Art Education For?* Elliot Eisner (1958) writes, “One of the primary goals in...education is to help students develop a visual and mental sensitivity that will affect their living experiences. We want to teach them how to see what they look at” (p. 258). I tell my students to be an artist—a writer, a poet—is to matter, to evolve, to know, to heal and to love. To create art is to question the world and to help others understand it. As Wilson (2006) asks, “And what is the point of writing and reading other than to construct and assess meaning?” (pg. 78).

I share previous winning sijo poems with my students to build an understanding that writing, like all art, is subjective. After reading each sijo poem, I ask questions. Erik Francis (2016) wrote, “When we ask our students good questions, our objective is not only to assess what they know or what they can do with what they have learned. It is also to explore how deeply they are able to respond to questions” (pg. 4). I aim to increase my students’ sensitivity. Instead of focusing on standards, learning targets or rubrics, my students discuss the value of art, our inclination and affinity for consumption. Students analyze and decipher. They conjecture why winning poems may have won, why judges may have resonated with certain topics, language choices or formats. I aim to stimulate thoughts to increase knowledge, understanding and awareness; I want to grow students’ thinking and develop curiosity and interest (Francis, 2016, p. 95). While displaying a model text, such as Alexandra Kindahl’s second place poem from 2015, “17321-01” (which I found on the website mentioned above), I ask probing questions of my students that “are not answered. They are addressed and evaluated based upon how the students respond to the question” (Francis, 2016, p. 144).

In the table below, I list questions to guide reading the first poem.

Table 1. Questions for initial reading of sijo

- What is this poem about?
- What is the point of the poem?
- What emotions are evoked?
- Who are the characters?
- What is the setting?
- What is the twist?
- What do you think the title refers to—both before and after the twist?
- What stylistic devices do you notice?
- What parts of the poem are particularly beautiful?
- What tense does the author (Kindahl) use? Why does she make this choice?
- What works for you in this poem?
- Where are you confused? What don’t you like?

Question an Author’s Purpose

From here, I find a second model to share with my students, often one a previous student wrote. I read this new poem aloud three times. Karen Wood (2001), in *Literacy Strategies Across the Subject Areas*, defines reading as “the process of constructing meaning from text. It is a dynamic process that involves a continuous interaction between the readers’ prior knowledge and the author’s intended message” (pg. vii). To connect my students to the text, I remind them each poem was crafted by an author who made a series of intentional and purposeful choices. Knowing these poems were written by students their own age builds confidence and resolve. Students read the poems and say, “If they can do it, I can too.” They also recognize what choices the author made.

After we have read several poems, I ask students what they notice. I guide the conversation and “ask them to examine *how* and *why*... Then, once they provide an explanation that is accurate, acceptable, appropriate and authentic, challenge them to investigate and inquire how else can the concept and procedure be used” (Francis, 2016, p. 147). I subscribe to Francis’s theory when I ask students to identify differences and similarities in each winning poem or to share which sijo poem they prefer. Their responses demonstrate analysis and critical thinking; our discussions “honor rhetorical purpose and effect—the way that words affect a reader’s mind—and encourage writers to understand that writing is assessed by readers who bring different understandings and experiences to their readings” (Wilson, 2006, p. 64). Without a test at the end of my sijo unit, “...questions serve as the formative and summative assessments that measure the extent of a student’s learning and they set the instructional focus for an active, student-centered learning experience” (Francis, 2016, p. 5). With each question, I aim to increase thinking and to develop sensitivity and awareness.

In our discussions, students consider each choice the poet made. Through dissection, students recognize the components of a successful sijo poem: story, characters, plot, emotion, beauty, art, song. Students notice the sijo poem is short and includes a twist. They identify (both consciously and subconsciously) topics to explore when they write their own sijo poems. Students recognize how each piece of writing affects them. In analyzing exemplars, using the previous winners as mentor texts, and answering my questions, students begin to see their world more vividly, more consciously. They recognize the stories in their lives—waiting to be shared, to be written about, to be crafted into art. In the table below, I share questions that may spark students’ inquiry into an author’s rhetorical choices.

Table 2. Questions about rhetorical choices

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you notice? • How does the poem feel like a song? • Why do you think she wrote about this topic? • What does this author suggest about life, about the universe? • Who are the characters? • What do you notice about the point of view? |
|---|

Respond to Sijo Poems

At this stage, my questions use the talk-through strategy “in which students are asked to individually share their thinking about a text...To take the discussion to a higher level” (Tankersley, 2005, p. 154). In answering questions, students “must demonstrate that they have a thorough grasp of the meaning of the text” (p. 155). Students also consider the meaning of the poem they will write: to make the reader laugh or cry or to get them to see the world differently.

One example I use to probe students’ reactions is a 2016 honorable mention, an untitled poem by Katie McFarland:

Here I am, the human pincushion,
constantly stabbing my skin with needles.

Here I am, a disappointment to my
parents, with a chronic disease.

Here I am, a teenager, trying to hold
onto a piece of nonexistent string.

Her poem presents an opportunity to discuss one of my favorite writing principles: the more specific

a writer, the more universal the experience becomes for the reader. Carl R. Rogers is the often quoted psychologist who said, “What is most personal is most universal.” I ask brave students to share what is most personal to them. I reference McFarland’s poem and we discuss how her experiences and emotions are universal. I ask students who they are afraid to disappoint, if they have a piece of string to hold on to. I ask if they think McFarland’s chronic disease is physical. I also ask why McFarland repeated “Here I am” three times.

There are no right answers to any of my questions. But “if...students are demonstrating and communicating—or showing and telling—the depth and extent of what they are learning, then [I] know [I’ve] asked a good question” (Francis, 2016, p. 5). My questions turn my classroom into a writers’ community—students relying on each other, noticing each other’s responses, making connections, hearing perspectives.

Prepare Students to Write

Through our discussions, I am reminded that my “ability to teach students to write more effectively depends equally on two factors: our students’ desire to be understood and clear, kind, honest articulation of how their words affect us” (Wilson, 2006, p. 68). Writing sijo poems requires students to move through Bloom’s Taxonomy as they recognize, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate and create (Francis, 2016, p. 12).

I put students in control. They are, after all, the poet. I remind them of the power of language. Poetry ignites the brain, as research suggests: “scans taken...showed that listening to the poems activated parts of participants’ brains that, as other studies have shown, are not activated when listening to music or watching films” (Delistraty, 2017). Their poems have power—they can, though topic, word and form choices, electrify brains and trigger emotions.

The feedback students receive from me on their poem drafts resembles the questions they once used to analyze winning poems: Is this what you intended? Is there another action verb you could use? What stylistic device might help your poem sing? Each of my questions mirrors what Francis contends: that “promoting cognitive rigor through classroom questioning involves asking good questions that prompt students to think deeply about how they can transfer and use what they are learning” (2016, p. 148). When introducing a new topic—or when helping students tackle a new form or skill—I remain optimistic. I direct students to think about their own

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writing process through my questions. As Wood wrote, “Research has shown that metacognition, the awareness and monitoring of one’s own thinking processes during learning and problem solving, aids students’ understanding and recall” (2001, p. xi). I want to respond to each student’s art, to “help students realize what they cannot yet do...to help every student improve” (Wilson, 2006, p. 30).

After each draft, I give students my genuine, emotional response to their art. On first and second drafts, I build confidence. Allowing students to believe they possess skills is the first step in mastery—part of my prescription to help them overcome anxiety, writer’s block, doubt. The power of positivity develops both my relationship with students and my students’ skills. On third and fourth drafts, I ask questions about nuance, word choice, punctuation. Questions allow me to understand each student’s process as well as remind students we are in this together. The table below includes questions I might ask a student in response to their drafts.

Table 3. Questions to guide student drafts

- What line are you most proud of?
- Where are you struggling?
- What are you unhappy with?
- What emotion do you want to evoke in this piece?
- What do you think the point of this story is?
- What do you want the reader to take away?
- What about adding X, Y or Z?
- Is there a better word to use here?
- How can you elevate the poetic nature of this piece?
- Which stylistic devices could you add?
- Is this what you intended?

I write alongside the students and share my struggles. I divulge the shadows of my anxiety, eating away at my innermost thoughts. I write my

first, second, third drafts on the board. I show students how messy the process, how imperfect my art. I am doing what Penny Kittle (2008) suggests when I model how writing works: slowly, creatively, through process and labor. My students appreciate my candor; we are a community of learners, together wading through drafting, writing, editing. I share my feelings about submitting my poem to the Sejong Cultural Society’s adult sijo competition.

Then, I encourage students to do the same: to submit their own sijo poems to a variety of writers’ markets. Students enter the Sejong Cultural Society’s annual competition; I create a class book of sijo poems; students send sijo poems to Mom, Dad, Grandpa, Auntie, Best-Friend, Boyfriend. We enjoy the best part of creating, of being artists: sharing our work with others. Another possibility for collaborating and celebrating is a poetry coffee shop, as suggested by Karen Tankersley in *Literacy Strategies for Grades 4-12: Reinforcing the Threads of Reading* (2005): “Turn your classroom into a version of the local coffee shop, complete with mood lighting. Invite parents, administrators, and fellow teachers to visit your coffee shop, [and] enjoy a brew (even if it is only cocoa)” (p. 21) while they listen to students read poetry.

Teaching sijo poetry through inquiry allows juniors and seniors in my creative writing classes to not only analyze and appreciate art, but also to write within the sijo form. It offers me the opportunity to know my students, their thoughts and their processes.

As the next Sejong Cultural Society’s sijo poetry deadline approaches, my students and I eagerly await the results and reading the winning poems and debating the judges’ assessments. Students tell me they enjoy the process of learning a new form, of using discussion and inquiry, of writing for an authentic purpose; I enjoy watching their writing emerge and hearing their voices.



Further Resources

The Sejong Cultural Society webpage has articles, lesson plans and videos of teachers teaching sijo poetry to high school and to elementary school students. “Korean Poetry Competition Provides Opportunity for American Students” (*Wisconsin English Journal*) is another resource for teaching sijo to your students.

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