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Teaching  
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# Korean Poetry Form Connects Students to Curriculum and Self

– Liz Jorgensen

## Introduction: Poetry's Power

Teachers show video clips, play excerpts from symphonies and take students to stage plays. They assign a diary entry written as Joseph Stalin, Barack Obama or Winston Churchill. Or a letter from the student's perspective, advocating for policy change. But to teach history, music, math or literature, teachers can also use poetry. As Christensen suggests, "Poetry is one of the strands in the weaving—a vital one" (133). And poetry might be the most effective way to accomplish understanding—of curriculum, of self and of the world.

Poetry teaches students how to write, read and understand; it gives them an outlet for surging emotions, and sharing poetry in the classroom fosters trust, empathy and community (Simmons). Poetry invites students to participate in their learning. Of course, "kids might hate the poetry that rustles in old pages and asks them to bow and be quiet when they come into a room. They might hate reading poetry unlocked only by the teacher's key...but give them poetry that presses its ear against the heartbeat of humanity and they're in love" (Christensen 126). Relatable poetry invites students to participate in the curriculum; and it allows them to discover themselves and their place in the world. Our earliest readings—Dr. Seuss, Mother Goose, Shel Silverstein—remind us of poetry's power to connect with children and that power still exists as children mature.

Whether teaching science, social studies, art, math, foreign language, physical education, music or language arts, poetry can be the antidote to struggles—for both students and teachers. Poetry builds a space for students to process, explore, learn, retain and allows students to look into a clearer lens—to make connections, to ask questions, to predict. By inviting students to write a poem about themselves or about a piece of curriculum, teachers can facilitate students' understanding and skills.

## An Authentic Audience

To provide a purpose and to offer poetry as a conduit for learning, consider writing for an authentic audience. As Wilson suggests, "Too often in schools, the artificiality of our writing assignments masks writing's rhetorical purposes" (76). Students perceive the contrived nature of writing without an authentic audience. Writing for an authentic purpose helps students see the power of their voices. As Zemelman and Daniels suggest, "Once students have chosen a publication effort...revising, polishing, perfecting grammar and mechanics become natural concerns, rather than just catering to teachers' pet peeves. Students want to make a good impression, and teenagers are all too conscious of the social appearance of what they do" (198). Students no longer write for a grade or for a teacher, but to add their voice to the canon.

The Sejong Cultural Society hosts an annual sijo poetry-writing competition for students and adults. I have used this writers' market in my classroom for over a decade. In composing poems for this competition, students can use a piece of curriculum or their own experience. As Park explains, "sijo are written about personal experiences, relationships, and everyday moments, as well as depicting the natural world." The opportunity to write about whatever a student desires is particularly useful for those who have an affinity for a topic or struggle to address assigned prompts.

## About Sijo

There are a myriad of poetic forms that can teach curriculum and self-awareness; in my classroom, students find success with Korea's sijo. Linda Sue Park, in *Tap Dancing on the Roof*, wrote that sijo "is a form that I think deserves to be more widely used and better known." Often referred to as haiku's cousin, sijo is a poem divided thematically and

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*Last summer, author Elizabeth Jorgensen introduced our readers to sijo. In this article, she explains how this poetic form can be used to facilitate students' understanding and skills. Jorgensen, a teacher and writer, received her undergraduate degree from Marquette University and her master's from Carroll University. Her memoir, co-written with Nancy Jorgensen, Go, Gwen, Go: A Family's Journey to Olympic Gold, is available from Meyer & Meyer Sport. Learn more at her website: <https://lizjorgensen.weebly.com>.*

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structurally by line and syllable count. “With its three lines, sijo resembles haiku, but the sijo poet has more room to develop a theme, narrative, or image before twisting and resolving it in the final line. Each line of 14 or 15 syllables consists of a string of four shorter phrases of three, four, or five syllables apiece” (Sege). Although haiku’s size forces the poet to suggest a meaning, sijo allows for fuller expression and development. As Sally True explained in *Elementary Education*, “The sijo express emotion, any emotion—sadness, happiness, anger, regret, gaiety, or compassion” (245).

Much like the rules of haiku, sijo presents a structure, the rhythm of the poem established in syllable groupings. Sijo were originally “short poems...sung at Court to the accompaniment of a lute” (True 245). Created even before the Korean alphabet (Hangeul), a sijo’s purpose remains today: to tell a story, to entertain, to tug at the heart’s strings, to make a reader think or feel. Like all poems, the words inside of a sijo should be “...like phrases of music; poets reading from their work are like musicians interpreting the notes on a page. Moreover, we should remember that if poetry’s earliest associations are with music, they are also with drama” (Bishop, Starkey 129).

Harvard Professor David McCann—often referred to as the ambassador of sijo—aims to make sijo as popular in American culture as haiku (Sege). And why can’t it be? Writing sijo is simpler than limerick or iambic pentameter: “Each line in a sijo has a special purpose. The first line introduces the topic. The second line develops the topic further. And the third line always contains some kind of twist—humor or irony, an unexpected image, a pun, or a play on words” (Park). Sijo presents students and teachers with a form and structure to explore topics, to play with language, and to write. The sijo also meets curriculum requirements: to resonate, to reflect, to recreate. Perhaps that’s why “sijo is one of Korea’s best contributions to world literature” (Peterson).

### Poems Connected to Curriculum

Students can capture any moment—any piece of content, perspective or area of study—and weave it into the sijo form. Sijo can be the vehicle that brings students to connect with others or a subject’s content and curriculum. One of my students, Bryce (grade 12), used Jackie Robinson as inspiration. He wrote “Season That Never Comes”:

I lace up stiff metal cleats,  
jog yellow foul pole to foul pole,  
strap on rugged batting gloves,  
and take ground balls off the infield turf.  
But it’s still minus four outside—  
forty two days till first pitch.

In his sijo, Bryce directs the reader to a season that never came for African American ball players—and uses Robinson’s jersey (42) to represent the days remaining until the season opener. In referring to the temperature, he suggests what froze Robinson’s progress and what prevented other African American players from achieving their dreams.

Students can also write sijo to help them understand or master content. Student Dante (grade 8), explored the Great Depression and religion in his sijo, “Back in New Orleans”:

In the South, Grandpa was born. Paper  
shack house had a dirt floor.

As a kid he drank coffee. Milk for them was  
too expensive.

They were rich with gospel spirit! In  
church they sang, and filled their hearts.

If not the Great Depression, students could write a sijo about any piece of curriculum: the swim unit in gym, a symphony in orchestra, a play in acting. They could write about a chemical reaction, about math formula or about the life of Stalin, Obama or Churchill.

Student Hye (grade 11) wrote from the perspective of the Kisaeng in “A Kisaeng’s Sijo.” In her sijo, she demonstrated an understanding of history and the people who lived through it:

With the rhythm of the janggu, we dance  
like magpies,

iridescent and spinning, hoping for freedom  
from the men

and their hands feeling at our ivory ankles,  
calves, and thighs.

As Christensen suggests, “The poetry that students write from the point of view of literary characters can be an entry into the concerns of people who come from different cultural or socioeconomic

backgrounds” (127). To take a concept and weave it into a poetic form requires depth of understanding. Students, in writing sijo, apply not only context, but also mastery and application. And this allows students to connect with content and curriculum—and with one another and their worlds.

### Poems Connected to Self

Teenagers, ripe with rebellion, resolve and resiliency, muddle their way through high school, searching for themselves and their place in the world. Yet, “too often schools don’t teach students how to handle the explosive feelings that come with adolescence. By writing and sharing the ‘raw core of feelings’ that create havoc in their lives, they can practice a more effective way of handling their emotions” (Christensen 132). Sijo can help students to not only know themselves, but also to process their place in the world—and to help them connect with it. Roberto (grade 12) did just this when he explored immigrants and the children born to them in his sijo, “Still American”:

They say go, return to land that I don’t know.  
It makes no sense.

Born and raised American, so Mexico is still  
foreign.

Culture kept, but this is my home. Immigrant,  
no: Hispanic.

Another sijo, written by Derek (grade 12), explores a family’s experience with the conflict of war. In “Valor,” using a protagonist’s perspective, Derek tugs at a soldier’s resolve—his heroism, boldness, fortitude:

My father was a hero mailing letters to  
soldiers in Japan.

My brother was a hero flying food to  
friendlies in Korea.

But I was a coward for shooting my gun in  
Vietnam.

When students write about personal experiences, teachers gain insight. They learn about their students’ motivations and affinities. Likewise, when students care about their writing, the quality is likely to improve. As Wilson suggests, the point of reading and writing is to “construct and assess meaning” (78) and that students will produce their best quality work when they know the teacher cares about what they have to say (77).

### Conclusion

When students’ poetic explorations of curriculum or self are complete, the next logical step is to find an authentic audience. My own students write and submit sijo to The Sejong Cultural Society’s competition. They also share poems with the community: “students in the class next door, down the hall, in another course or class, or in another building...little kids in a nearby elementary school... school bulletin boards and displays...the shelves of the school or community library...government officials... teachers they had in the past...friends, relatives, and parents...” (Zemelman, Daniels 199). Additional writers’ markets are on Submittable and many schools publish a literary magazine. Peter Elbow notes, however, that intimidation can overshadow motivation when writing for an authentic audience (1973, 1981). To combat this, “students may need to turn inward to figure out what they have to say” (Zemelman, Daniels 201). Teachers can remind students that, as Shelley famously claimed, “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” Students may also find comfort in the depth and breadth of a poem’s possibility; that in writing their own sijo, they can delve into any reality, from any point in history—theirs or someone else’s. As Sink suggests, “Children do have much to say and can indeed be very creative. Let’s stop crushing that creative potential and let’s start recognizing and foster its development” (186).

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