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# In Defense of Teaching Poetry

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*Who needs poetry?* [asks William Logan's recent op-ed in the \*New York Times\*](#). It concludes, somewhat elegiacally, that only some of us do. Poetry's day in the sun has come and gone, it argues, and this once-great art must satisfy itself with a dusty life on the bookshelves of bespectacled enthusiasts.

Like ballet or opera, it has become the province of the few.

But I actually think we have an opportunity to shape a world where the opposite is the case. (Bespectacled enthusiasts unite!) Poetry may be poised for a comeback precisely where it's needed most - in our nation's schools.

The future of poetry education is by no means certain. This April The Pioneer Institute, a Massachusetts group opposed to the national education standards known as the Common Core, [published a paper](#) attacking them for what they argue is a de-emphasis and misunderstanding of poetry.

I disagree with the notion that poetry is getting crowded out of our classrooms. While the standards are at times unclear about the role poetry should play in each grade, [only a misreading](#) of them suggests they completely devalue it. Still, I agree that this is the right

time to be thinking about how and when we teach poetry.

The Pioneer Institute rightly points out that given the lack of clarity, schools have the potential to make poor choices about the right place to include poetry in their curricula.

And the right place is everywhere.

Poetry is a means of expression in which structure is as vital as language.\* Reading it forces us to look at the power and flexibility of words in ways we might not otherwise.

What does that mean for teachers? Everything is up for grabs when you read a poem — line and stanza length, use of pauses, meter, rhythm, figurative language, consonance, assonance... the list is long and exhaustive. Ultimately, there are few ways to read a poem *besides* close reading it, which sounds pretty Common Core-aligned to me.

More importantly, this type of reading is the key to opening the rich world of language for our students.

If children tell you that they do not like poetry, the first question you should ask is whether they have ever been taught how to read it. Most often, the answer is no — students often think that to read a poem is to race through its lines, skimming it like a newspaper article between subway stops.

But if you don't know how to read a poem, how could you know how to love it?

Think of reading poetry like a trip to the art museum. If you've never taken an art history class, examined any techniques, or seen lots of other art, how will you have the patience to uncover the rich meaning in Copley's A Boy With a Flying Squirrel — a skill the Lincoln Center Institute calls "noticing deeply"? More likely, you'll walk away from it with either superficial appreciation, or a lack of appreciation at all.

As goes painting, so too poetry. In both cases, if we don't know how to interact with art, an understanding of it becomes fenced off to us.

As an audience, we're fairly predictable. Rightly or not, we tend to devalue what we do not understand. Children who don't know how to digest poetry grow into adults with no taste for it.

I confess I can be a bit sentimental about this topic. The Pioneer Institute’s argument that students must be exposed to poetry for its own sake — for its ability to open up a world of wonder and awe and presence — resonates with me.

I suspect it does for Logan, too, who muses in his op-ed that a great curriculum would involve students being exposed to poetry all the time.

But while he sees that world as unlikely, and while the Pioneer Institute sees it as spoiled by standards, I sense it is at our fingertips in a way it never has been.

The Common Core has opened the door for the schools I work with to teach more poetry, and richer texts, than we ever have before.

What a gift.

*Who needs poetry?* Your children, that’s who. If we teachers fail to deliver, the fault will lie not in our stars — or in our standards.

*\*A friend of mine suggested this definition to me years ago, and it’s the simplest and most powerful I’ve found.*

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