Using Poetry in the Undergraduate Biology Classroom

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ABSTRACT
Traditional assessments in college biology classrooms, such as exams and lab reports, often have limited utility in promoting long-lasting understanding of course material and do not always engage students from all backgrounds. The inclusion of creative scientific writing assignments, especially those that require application of sophisticated course material, is an underutilized strategy in higher education. Here, we describe our use of student-generated poetry in two midlevel undergraduate biology classes. We have found that by encouraging students to write poems in response to carefully crafted prompts and having them assess the scientific accuracy of the poems, we can encourage them to identify misconceptions prior to exams, potentially resulting in deeper and longer-lasting understanding of course material. Furthermore, the inclusion of poetry empowers students who might not otherwise participate in class to contribute, resulting in a more inclusive classroom climate.

Key Words: active learning, nontraditional assessment, poetry, STEAM

Introduction
A major goal of college-level biology teaching is to promote deep understanding and the ability to apply learned material to new situations, rather than just memorization. One effective way to accomplish this is to engage students in various forms of scientific writing, with the purpose of having them apply their knowledge and clarify their thinking (Glynn & Muth, 1994; Moore, 1994; Halpern & Hakel, 2003; Quitadamo & Kurtz, 2007). Typically, these writing assignments take the form of lab reports and analyses of scientific papers, which often require students to follow a template. These writing exercises can be powerful, especially when the students use them to reflect on the scientific process. However, their inherent structure may lead students to assume that there is a “right way” to do the assignment and in order to get a good grade and tempt them to plagiarize or paraphrase their responses from outside sources. In addition, these types of assignments often do not relate to students’ real-world experiences and are therefore not inherently motivating. To address these issues, less prescriptive types of writing assignments have been popularized in “Writing Across the Curriculum” efforts. These activities provide students with opportunities to explore scientific concepts in novel contexts and include persuasive essays, letters to parents or siblings, or editorials to local newspapers (Glynn & Muth, 1994; Pelger & Nilsson, 2016).

In the past five years, efforts to incorporate arts into the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) disciplines have become popular with the STEAM movement (Bequette & Bequette, 2012; Henriksen, 2014). In particular, STEAM has encouraged instructors in college-level science courses to use a variety of creative writing assignments, such as narrative storytelling in physiology (Bunker & Schnieder, 2015), analysis of science fiction in biology and physics (Copeland et al., 2018), and popular science writing in molecular biology (Pelger & Nilsson, 2016). Creative writing through poetry has also been incorporated into teaching in various scientific disciplines, both in K–12 education (Frazier & Murray, 2009; Forster et al., 2018; Jones, 2018) and in undergraduate chemistry and physics classes (Alber, 2001; Schmidt, 2013; Araujo et al., 2015; Radhakrishnan, 2017). More recently, writing “code poems” has become popular in the computer sciences. However, published examples of poetry being used in the teaching of college-level biology are rare, particularly in courses intended for biology majors.

Here, we present one way in which we have introduced the arts into our upper-division Marine Biology and Molecular Biology classes, which are typically taken by undergraduate biology and biochemistry majors. At least once each semester, we ask the students to write a poem about a scientific concept or process related to a central theme of the course. The goals of these assignments are to (1) promote thoughtful and creative student engagement with class material according to specific prompts; (2) help students analyze the material by distilling it into their own words; (3) allow students and instructors to discover misconceptions prior to exams; and (4) provide an alternative, nonthreatening mechanism of assessment. Through the combined 40 years that we have been using this assignment in our courses, we have found
that it provides us with information about student understanding that is often difficult to obtain via traditional assessments, and it infuses the curriculum with energy.

**Description & Examples of Poetry Assignment**

To encourage students to engage with the class material early in the course, we offer them a poetry-writing assignment approximately two weeks before the material will be assessed on an exam. Students have one week to submit their poems. In their responses, they must include specific biological details that they have learned in the course and correctly use vocabulary relevant to the topic. Beyond this, there is no requirement for type of poem or formatting. In the past, students have submitted limericks, sonnets, haikus, ballads, epic poems, raps, and various types of visual poetry.

Examples of the assignment prompts and a sample student submission for each are shown in Figures 1 and 2. Both poems demonstrate that the students have a well-developed, but not perfect, understanding of the subject material. For example, the author of the trematode poem (Figure 1) correctly describes the parasite’s life cycle, although it isn’t clear how deep her understanding is of the relationship between the organism’s life stages and its hosts.

**Figure 1.** Poetry prompt and sample student response for Marine Biology.
She incorporates scientific terminology in appropriate ways and correctly uses some words that weren’t required, such as metacercaria, platyhelminth, and germ balls, indicating that she is digging deeper into the biology than was required for the assignment. Similarly, the author of the DNA repair poem (Figure 2) accurately states what types of damage are bypassed during translesion synthesis, although it isn’t clear at the beginning of stanza 2 if she is referring to missing DNA bases or deletions of nucleotides (which cannot be bypassed). She nicely highlights how the physical structure of the translesion polymerase allows it to copy past the damaged DNA base, the event that happens next, and the underlying reason behind the use of this biological mechanism. Importantly, she addresses fundamental concepts that are the focus of the learning objectives for the instructional unit and does so in a clever but accurate way. In both cases (and in most student poems), the understanding of the biological phenomena is good, and the instructor also gains insight into misconceptions that may need to be addressed.

**Student Participation & Assessment**

Typically, we have made these poems optional assignments, so as not to penalize students for whom writing a poem seems too difficult. Students who complete the assignment and demonstrate application of their scientific knowledge are awarded extra credit toward their final grade. Assessment of the poems is holistic and based on the students’ ability to fully address the prompt. The instructors provide written feedback on the poems well in advance of the exam, focusing on the accuracy of the scientific content. We have found that the percentage of students who submit poems varies between 60% and 75% in any given year. Interestingly, we have found that some students will spend an hour or more writing their poem, indicating a high degree of intellectual investment. Because we do not require that the poem be written in a specific format or that it rhyme, we have found that much of the students’ focus is on incorporating course material, rather than on the mechanics of the poetry.

Free-response comments on end-of-course evaluations suggest that most students enjoy the poetry assignment. They appreciate how it allows them to make connections between major topics in the class while having fun with the material. In addition, many of the comments suggest that students are reviewing and integrating important concepts while writing their poems. We have noticed that this type of assignment can be difficult for non-native English speakers, and we have occasionally received comments on student evaluations to this effect. However, because the assignment is counted solely as extra credit, its low-stakes nature may encourage students who do not feel comfortable writing poetry to at least make an attempt.

Examples of student comments on a poetry assignment dealing with the functioning of the fish swim bladder can be found in Figure 3.
Dealing with Misconceptions

As might be expected, some students include misconceptions or inaccuracies in their poems. In addition to having the instructor identify these in written feedback, we have found it beneficial to have the students actively engage in the review process. This can take several forms. In Marine Biology, the professor chooses a few submissions that are well-detailed and largely correct but that reveal some key (and often common) misunderstandings. These are distributed to the class, and the students engage in peer review in small groups, looking for misconceptions or important omissions. In Molecular Biology, a review panel composed of professors in the biology and English departments chooses some of the best poems in each DNA repair pathway category, and willing students read their poems aloud in a "poetry slam." During the slam, the students are asked to record important points and any inaccuracies that they hear and submit them to the instructor at the end of class. In all cases, feedback is provided to the participants in written format or in one-on-one meetings with the instructor. Notably, in both classes we have found that the process of reading the poems aloud and engaging in peer review benefits the students in ways that professors' lectures or explanations do not.

Effectiveness & Other Considerations

Our multiple years of experience with this assessment technique indicate that it adds instructional value and spontaneity to our courses and is fun for both the students and instructors. The assignment serves as a bridge between the arts and sciences and allows students to exercise creativity in a science class. Because the process of writing a poem requires the students to synthesize information and make useful connections between different concepts in a novel way, they are more likely to retain the information, not only for subsequent assessments such as exams, but sometimes well beyond the end of the class. For example, one Molecular Biology student, in an email to the professor, wrote: "Amazingly I still remember that poem and it is from almost three years ago." While we have not conducted a formal analysis comparing the benefits of this type of writing assignment with more traditional writing assignments or other active pedagogical techniques, our anecdotal evidence from student evaluations suggests that it is well-received and engages students from a wide variety of academic backgrounds. Furthermore, while we have utilized it in a course setting designed for biology majors, it could easily be adapted for a nonmajors course.

Conclusion

While the use of poetry in science has been adopted multiple times in K–12 educational settings, it is rarely used in college biology courses. We argue that its inclusion in the curriculum can be extremely effective, especially when combined with assignments involving other forms of scientific writing. One example of this approach is found at Wellesley College, where a chemistry professor writes and performs her own poems for her students, using personification to teach complex chemistry concepts (Radhakrishnan, 2017). These poems have been subsequently used as a basis for analysis of chemistry concepts at other institutions (Araujo et al., 2015). We have taken this one step further by having the students create their own poems describing complex biological phenomena and then analyze them in a nonthreatening setting in order to help address common misconceptions. Based on our experiences, we propose that crafting poems about biological topics allows students who struggle with traditional scientific writing assignments to become more invested in the learning process, leading to better educational outcomes and more vibrant science classrooms.

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References


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