



The Growth Model: A Poetry Continuum

Whether we are a student, a classroom teacher, a librarian, a poetry organization, a poet, or a literate adult, we can place ourselves on the continuum in this educational Growth Model. The point of such a continuum is in the spirit of the thing, and the key is to think about the quality of what can happen and not just tactics (although they are interesting in their own right).

The Growth Model

Seeds > Soil > Nutrients-Water-Sun > Maturity > Seeds

Seeds

Poetry seeds are small invitations.

They are simple and non-demanding. The silly? The banal? The fragment? The movie clip? The humorous? The passionate? The visual? All are allowed. All are scattered abroad without focusing on judgment or analysis. It should take no expert knowledge to participate.

Soil

Poetry soil is a social experience, a community that begins searching for what feels more powerful word-wise, still without a push towards analysis.

It involves a level of curation and elevation. We share what we love, we collect it or read it aloud to one another, we “oh and ah” over it. We don’t need to understand who the poet is or what he or she did with alliteration or similes. We simply need to feel free to share what we love—even if we don’t understand what contributes to the power of our chosen verse.

Nutrients, Water, Sun

These are larger invitations, still without judgment—but not without inquiry.

We say to ourselves or to those we lead, “So you love what Whitman did there? How do you think it happened? Was it an accident, or is there some craft behind it?”

On the one hand, the amateur will often claim it was all accident, all heart. On the other hand, some experts will assert that it was all craft, all purpose. The truth is it could be either (or more likely both), for any given poem. This is the moment to think things through and question, “If I wanted to accomplish something similar, either through accident or craft, what would it take for me to do so?”

Then, choose a path—or ten—and try.

Here is the chance to introduce solid ideas about how to write good free verse or form poetry like the ghazal, the sonnet, and so forth. But here is also the chance to introduce ideas on how to become more creative and open, in order to promote more happy accidents in our writing.

If there is no interest in writing poems, then a person can go on collecting but add the effort of *pairing like with like*, based on either theme or form or general feel. Part of this collection can involve copying the poems out, which will allow the hand to seamlessly teach the brain on matters of craft.

Pruning

At last, we admit that some poems (many poems!) could be made better (or that, with certain changes, some poems would be made worse).

This part of the continuum is characterized not just by smart revision strategies but also by fun substitutions of words or playful shifts in line breaks, to prove to ourselves that the poem really is (or is not) a work of art—or a work of art that has achieved something specific.

In an essay by James Longenbach in *Poetry* magazine, he does just this, pulling apart famous poems and re-ordering their lines. The result is fascinating and enlightening; the practice would make for a nice higher-level conversation in the classroom or in a poets’ and writers’ group.

Maturity

In the final stage, a person is facile with poems. But the truly **mature** don’t settle for sitting on this side of the continuum (and they certainly don’t disdain others who are yet to enter).

Instead, they become active in promoting the continuum from its beginning. They also understand that they can find ways to personally move through it again—perhaps branching out to another culture’s, or societal segment’s, or medium’s way of engaging with poetry.

Through this re-entry, the **mature** can cultivate both humility and new delight—something which great poetry itself both asks of us and promises.

Questions for Reflection

1. Where am I, personally, on the poetry continuum?
2. Where is my program, teaching approach, organization, other, on the continuum?

3. If I have constituents, where are they on the continuum? (Not sure? Try a survey.)
4. Have I (or my program, etc.) gotten stuck or felt compelled to settle at one place on the continuum? What are the risks of staying stuck there? If my (or my program, etc's) place on the continuum is a deliberate choice, do I support outside efforts that offer other continuum points?
5. If my program, classroom approach, etc., offers multiple points on the continuum, is this clear to constituents? And, do they have both the freedom to engage at the point that feels best to them and feel inspired (and have adequate tools) to keep moving along the continuum?
6. What accidental blocks between continuum points may there be, for me personally, or for my program, classroom approach, etc.? How can I begin to address these blocks?

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