

Thoughts on teaching and learning haiku

by Jeannie Martin

To learn, and not to do, is not to learn”

Chinese proverb

Over the past ten years I have been lucky enough to teach haiku in a variety of settings, but always with adults. These are some thoughts I want to share with you, with the hope that they will be useful in your own teaching.

Teaching haiku is something like the form itself: direct, immediate, and responsive to time and place. It is not a matter of expert-to-student but instead a participation in the deep sharing of the present moment. Haiku should be and is pleasurable, relaxing, fun, and with any luck at all, people can create a couple of haiku poems pretty much right away that they like and enjoy sharing.

To do this, one must be more or less relaxed, prepared and yet spontaneous, expert on the form and yet a good listener, and open to learner ideas. It helps to be able to more or less “step aside” and let the form carry itself to the learners. Humility is a very good trait to develop in the teaching of haiku.

One must also be “learner – centered”. Learn about teaching haiku from your students. Each group is different, each setting unique. Groups, workshops, and courses will vary considerably from week to week, session-to-session and term-to-term. Keep active, awake and aware in each session, treat your students kindly and with enthusiasm and you will be fine.

Preparing for your workshop or course:

Learn all you can about your participants: their learning needs, experience with haiku, their feelings about writing together, literacy skills, writing tools and so on. I have taught in groups where people do not speak English, are not literate, have no pen or paper with which to write, have memory loss, and so on. It all works, but be prepared.

Bring haiku that are relevant to the lives of your participants and will meet their learning needs. You might have to “sell” the form a little at the beginning, as no

one seems to know what real haiku is. Do this in the way you feel most comfortable.

Make sure your setting is quiet, private and as comfortable as possible. I have done workshops in basements, prisons, and hot and stuffy classroom. All are okay as long as there is not a lot of interruption, and people have a place to think quietly together.

Make sure that your learners feel the setting is safe and a good place to learn. You can state expectations at the beginning if you want: start and end on time, everyone has a chance to participate, no cell phones and other distractions, no side conversations, and so on. Develop an atmosphere of trust, openness ability to experiment with this form.

Most importantly, encourage your learners to write during the group, and ask people to share what they have written. You will be able to do this if everyone feels like the group is a safe place. Make sure you give positive feedback. There is something positive about every haiku and you might have to be creative at finding it, but you can and should say something. People learn from what they do well. Encourage the positive. Balanced feedback in terms of helpful criticism is okay as long as you are very very diplomatic and supportive. Regard each new poem as a new and vulnerable creation. You do not have to be disingenuous, but you do need to respect the vulnerability of your new learners.

End each session with a summary of what happened during the group, what people talked about and learned, and suggestions for things to do between meetings. Perhaps most important is for your participants to enjoy haiku by becoming more aware of “haiku moments” in everyday life. Encourage them to carry a small notebook and take notes and write poems through the week. You can share some at the beginning of each session, and then go from there.

And: Enjoy your teaching. Be relaxed, enthusiastic and share what you know, and also a part of yourself. These are adults and they want to know something about you. Tell them what you think is helpful to their own learning. Make sure they have successes, and enjoy the form.

Here are some sample session outlines and suggestions. This is for four, 90-minute sessions, but can be adapted to other timeframes. I have incorporated these ideas into daylong haiku retreats, 6 – 8 short sessions, and half-day workshops. This is just a place to start. You will have many other ideas that might work better for your learners.

Session One Outline

(Make sure the seating is comfortable, everyone can see each other, and there is a table or desks available. Be prepared with pens, pencils and paper. It can be surprising what people do not bring to writing workshops.)

Hi and welcome to the course. Introduce yourself, the session and what you will cover today.

Participant introductions: name and something they would like to share about themselves, including experience with haiku.

Explain any expectations or guidelines you have for the group. Examples: no cell phone or texting, location of bathrooms and so on.

Short talk. Create handouts you think are useful for your group to go with your talk. Be sure to cover:

What is haiku? Myths and facts about haiku. Some of the essential characteristics of haiku.

History and origins of haiku.

Share several examples of haiku to go over together and talk about. Ask them what they see. Encourage participation.

Hand around a number of haiku poems, ask each person to select several that they especially like. After everyone has had a chance to read through them and make their selections, ask each person to read aloud the haiku they have chosen.

Use the time remaining as an opportunity to write together. Be gently encouraging, and if people want they can share what they have written.

Homework: Think about haiku and be aware of “haiku moments”. Write if they want.

Session Two Outline

Hi and welcome.

Participant introductions and check in – how was your week?

Re-cap of last session - any questions?

Any poems to share and review together? This is a good teaching moment – you must be supportive and positive when making comments as you show what haiku is and is not.

Chose one or two English speaking haiku poets (past or present) and describe their work. Show examples and ask the group to comment on the haiku. Relate comments to the characteristics of haiku talked about in the first session.

Remind people also of the structure of a haiku poem and some thoughts about how to write a haiku,

Spend some time doing a group poem – either one or two, depending on the time and interest of the group. You will need to actively participate in the creation of these poems.

The rest of the session is spent writing and sharing haiku,

Homework: give each person a shell, stone or something else you have brought in. Encourage them to use this as a prompt for writing this week, or anything else that triggers their imaginations and brings them more fully into the here and now.

Sessions Three and Four

These two sessions will follow along the same lines.

Welcome participants; ask for questions, recap any information you think they need to remember about writing haiku.

Go over any poems written during the week,

Provide some new information depending on the learning needs and interests of your participants. There are many topics available: use of metaphor, time and place, concrete imagery, is haiku primarily a nature poem, and so forth.

Allow for time to spend writing together. Often writing for about 15 – 20 minutes, and then taking time and share and critique, is comfortable for people but again it will depend on your group.

You might want to bring in sample journals, anthologies and other haiku publication. This is also an opportune time to talk about HAS!

Note: as you finish your course, ask people for any feedback they would like to share for you to add to your next teaching.

You might also want to end with a tea or other way of celebrating and acknowledging the end of the group and the beginning of writing haiku for your participants.