

My First Haiku Course: Reflections on Teaching & Learning

by Mark A. Forrester

I have been teaching in the English department at the University of Maryland for more than twenty-five years. I have taught a variety of literature courses, as well as classes in academic and professional writing. However, I had never gotten to teach an entire course devoted to the study of haiku—until two years ago.

When I daydreamed about teaching such a course, I imagined having several months to prepare: going through my collection of books, reading additional books and articles, selecting readings on a variety of topics. I imagined marketing the course to students who might be interested: English majors, poets, and those interested in the Japanese language and culture.

Here's how it actually unfolded: Five days before the semester started, I received an email from the director of our campus's Honors Humanities program (known on campus as "HoHum"). A professor slated to teach one of their "Second-Year Seminars on Global Humanities" had pulled out to accept the head curator position at a prestigious museum. Would I be interested in teaching my own course in that spot? Of course, I said!¹

I had previously submitted a proposal to Honors Humanities, for a course audaciously entitled "How Haiku Conquered the World," only to have my proposal rejected. Now I had five days to turn that proposal into a complete 15-week syllabus, with set topics and readings, along with the assignments students would complete. Of course, my proposal had involved some thinking about these requirements. Nevertheless, a brief proposal is very different from a fully designed course.

An additional concern was how the students would respond: they

¹ My course, a section of HHUM205: Second-Year Seminars on Global Humanities, ran in the fall semester of 2021.

had signed up for a class on public monuments and racial issues, as well as other social justice concerns. (I rather wished I could take that course myself!) How would they react to having that course replaced with one on a very different topic, one they had likely not encountered in a classroom since elementary school?

On that count, at least it turned out that I didn't need to worry. The HoHum director emailed students the day before our first class, alerting them to the change and putting in a strong sales pitch for my class. The students arrived aware of the new topic. They were curious, perhaps a bit skeptical—but more than willing to give haiku a fair chance. (I was gratified to learn that one of the 15 students had switched into my course after learning of the new topic.)

Designing the course was challenging, but certainly rewarding. While my students probably wondered how we could spend a full semester talking about haiku, to me it seemed a challenge to fit in everything I wanted to discuss. I wanted to start with basic definitions, of course, and a look at the historical development of haiku. We would need to study the Japanese masters, but I also wanted to look at how haiku came to the West, the problem of translation, and the development of English-language haiku.

The topics I settled on also included related genres (tanka, senryu, and haibun). We looked at female haijin, both in Japan and the West, as well as African-American haijin. Time was devoted to both the modernists and the beatniks. We spent a day on haiku's connection to the visual arts, discussed objectivity and subjectivity in haiku, looked at haiku in a few other cultures, considered how haiku can address social issues, and studied some more experimental haiku.

Because the course was small, and I was still—to some extent—designing it as I went, I was able to make slight modifications as I went. When Chris² asked why all of the haiku were about

cats, rather than dogs, and baseball, rather than any other sport (perhaps those were my own biases creeping in), I added as a haibun selection Cor van den Heuvel's section on "Basketball" in his memoir *A Boy's Journey*. Many students responded to his vivid imagery, and were able to connect the emotions evoked to their own memories and experiences. One of van den Heuvel's haiku about basketball practice, for example, reminded Kara, a life-long swimmer, "of early-morning practices and meets . . . and how still the water always was before the first person dove in."

Since I had been given the course so close to the start of the semester, I did not think it was fair or practical to ask students to purchase a required book—and there was certainly no single book that covered everything I wanted to talk about. Instead I selected readings from my own collection and research. (Until the end of the semester, I was deciding on readings, scanning and posting them, right ahead of the students' reading schedule.)

I included scholarship and analysis from a wide variety of authors, from R. H. Blyth and Harold G. Henderson to Lee Gurga and Richard Gilbert. Primary readings included haiku (and related works) I selected from my own collection of books and journals. Students read *Bashō's Narrow Road to the Interior* and Lenard D. Moore's volume *Desert Storm* in their entirety, as well as a complete issue of the journal *Femku*.

What most impressed and energized me throughout the semester were our class discussions. Students came to class having not only read, but thought about, the assigned material. They had smart questions and astute observations to share. Our conversations often connected one day's readings to material from previous discussions, and the students frequently connected the readings to their own interests and experiences as well.

² All students provided consent to use their real first names. Some also agreed to have their last names used with their haiku; two did not.

One reading, which discussed the early days of haiku on the Internet, mentioned the phenomenon of online haiku teachers. Questions were raised about how one could know who to trust. One student compared this to the idea of online *sensei*; Chris picked up the martial arts analogy and explained that it can be hard to find a *sensei* in the non-virtual world as well. Tierney compared this to the problem of self-promoting yoga teachers who lack the appropriate certification. Alex suggested that this was related to there being two aspects of yoga (the purely physical and the more meditative). Colleen then tied this back to haiku, contrasting haikai who worried only about the form of haiku with those more interested in the spirit or philosophy of the genre.

Another discussion, centered on the use of haiku to address social issues, raised the question of how one makes a very local scenario accessible to an audience living, perhaps, in a very different culture or time period. One student connected this obstacle to Taylor Swift's music. Other students then chimed in to discuss how Swift presents her personal experiences in a way that allows others to relate to them—using just enough personal details to draw the audience in, but not so much to exclude the listeners' own imaginations and perspectives.

Most of the discussions were student-led. Based on their preferences, I would assign two students to that day's topic. They would read the assigned material, generate discussion questions, and guide the class conversation that day. These discussions were fascinating, in part because the class would come up with points and perspectives I had not considered. I tried to let the students run the discussion as much as possible, though I sometimes got so caught up in the conversation that I couldn't help adding in my own thoughts and questions.

Students had a variety of writing assignments to solidify their learning. Most weeks, students participated in an online discussion thread, posting their own thoughts and responding to their

classmates. The prompt might ask about that week's readings, ask students to connect ideas from different weeks, or ask for a more general reaction to the work so far—I wanted to hear what was on their minds, especially if it was something that hadn't occurred to me.

In addition, students were assigned two papers to write over the course of the semester. For the first paper, a few weeks into the semester, I provided each student with an issue of a recent haiku journal. Each student was to select five haiku from that issue and write a descriptive analysis of each, applying the haiku vocabulary we had been developing (such as *kigo* and *kireji*). The students' analyses were intelligent and perceptive, and it was fascinating to see which haiku they selected—and why.

For the second paper, I gave students a range of topics to choose from. Some chose a topic they were interested in and wrote about that, covering subjects like death poems, haiku and subjectivity, and haiku and the Harlem Renaissance. Others curated a selection of ten haiku and wrote an essay explaining why each had been chosen, either on a thematic basis (loneliness, aging, social equality) or by connecting them to the history of haiku. One student, Jacob, tackled the question raised by the course's title: how had a poetry form connected so closely to the culture and language of Japan come to be written in so many countries and languages, over so many years?

And six students bravely chose to write ten of their own haiku, as well as an essay discussing the influences on their work and the techniques they were employing. Once again, I was impressed by their creativity as well as their insightfulness. Alex Nevo, who embraced the more traditional haiku and shook his head at the most experimental pieces, wrote his own haiku connecting the style of Bashō to more contemporary topics:

Cold moonless night—
from a pocket a buzz
“Almost there”

(Alex also cheekily offered his own one word haiku in response to Cor van den Heuvel’s “tundra”: “Costco.”)

Liliana Valdez-Lane crafted haiku that paid tribute to the lives and styles of the masters, like this one inspired by Shiki:

Springtime for baseball
Fall for persimmons.
What of the rest?

Anna Gompers drew images from her own experiences:

Gridlock
In clouds of car exhaust
A summer breeze

John Ikegwu offered haiku based on his own observations, but also this clever response to Chiyo-ni’s morning glory— / the well-bucket entangled / I ask for water³:

Summer heat
A thirsty child
Casts the morning glory aside

Christopher Gresh was inspired by happy memories of his childhood:

bed of fallen leaves
prepared for my leap—
the sound of red and orange

Since we completed the renga in the first half of the semester, I wanted to have the students tackle something similar—but not identical—during the second half. There were 15 students in the class, I was able to put them in five groups of three and task each group with writing a six-stanza rengay. Because of their increased knowledge, as well as the smaller, more collaborative teams, I found these pieces even tighter and more effective. Tianju Fu, Ananyaa Malhotra, and Liliana Valdez-Lane composed a rengay with beautiful cohesiveness and clever transitions:

strolling through
cherry blossom trees
hand in hand

on the nearby bench
a layer of pollen

makes her sneeze
bouquet of lilies
A wedding day

chocolate sauce stains
on the flower girl's dress

attracted by the aroma
a bumblebee flies
into a ladybell

discarded in haste
crushed roses

Since the autumn air was getting crisp, and students were looking forward to the end of the semester, other groups chose to use winter as the season for their rengay. Two of my favorite stanzas, just two lines each, evoked that season quite effectively:

fresh baked cookies;
scotch on dad's breath

(from Tierney, Jacob Hurley, and Katie Salko's group)

warm flickering candles
potato latkes

(from Maya Wheeler, Alex Nevo, and Anna Gompers)

Students also had the opportunity to craft their own translation of a haiku by Chiyo-ni, using an exercise in Stephen Addiss's excellent book *The Art of Haiku*. Addiss provides a word-by-word explanation of possible readings and challenges readers to decide which options to include and how to arrange them. Students were surprised at the difficulty: how do we know what best represents the author's intentions, and how do we balance faithfulness to the original with clarity and smoothness in English?

In retrospect, I wish I had devoted more time in the classroom to the writing of haiku. In their final comments, several students also shared this regret. I had wanted to cover as much of the history and theory as I could, and I suppose I was nervous about forcing students who had not initially signed up for a course on haiku to write their own—or perhaps I was simply nervous about stepping outside my comfort zone to conduct a workshop. But getting a glimpse into the creative process makes it much easier to understand any field of art, and should I get the chance to teach this course again, I would certainly allot more time for haiku composition.

The second best part of teaching—after the experience of working with such bright students—is what I learn myself along the way. The process of developing the course required me to research and think about haiku's rich history in a more rigorous and organized manner than I had before. Because I wanted to provide students

a broad overview, I covered a few topics (such as the visual arts) that I had not given much thought to previously. While my own biases inevitably affected what was included in the syllabus, I also gained a greater appreciation for some haiku and haibun I had underestimated in the past. And I learned so much from my students, who left me feeling energized and inspired after every class session.

I was grateful for the chance to spend an entire semester talking about haiku, and pleased by the responses of my students. In a letter several of them wrote to the director of HoHum after the semester was completed, they stated, “Reading and writing haiku has allowed us to practice a new way of thinking and approaching the artistic process. For haiku, external inspiration and internal creativity must go together hand-in-hand to create something that truly captures the essence of haiku.” That is a lesson I think they (and all of us) can carry forward into all of our endeavors.

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