Data Diving into "Noticing Poetry": An Analysis of Student Engagement with the "I Notice" Method

Scot Slaby
Shanghai American School

Jordan Benedict
Shanghai American School

This paper explores students' engagement in reading poems, examining data on their self-perceptions of their confidence and competence in reading poems before, during, and after using the "I Notice" methodology as adapted from The Academy of American Poets' unit plan, "Noticing Poetry" (Slaby, 2017). The data was collected over the course of a month from January 9 through January 30, 2018 and involved five classes of one hundred general English tenth grade students across three teachers' classrooms at Shanghai American School's Puxi High School Campus. Data indicates that the "I Notice" method and the "Noticing Poetry" unit and its activities increased student engagement in reading poems and fostered greater student self-efficacy as readers of poetry.

According to The Poetry Foundation, "People who didn't develop an interest in poetry frequently said that they couldn't relate to it as students, often because they found it difficult to understand" (University of Chicago's, 2005). The corresponding National Opinion Research Center's (NORC) study submitted to The Poetry Foundation found that why adults find poetry difficult to understand can be traced back to their experiences with poetry in school and can often be linked to a specific teacher (Bradburn, Parks, & Reynolds, 2006, p. 5). According to NORC, "earlier qualitative work highlighted the influential role that one person can play in the development of an appreciation of poetry, and it was often a teacher or a relative" (Bradburn, Parks, & Reynolds, 2006, p. 5). Since the surveyed adults' attitudes toward poetry were influenced by their past teachers, it stands to reason that teachers have a responsibility to teach poetry with fidelity, since their approach may have long lasting effects on a person's ability to appreciate the genre.

However, many teachers are afraid of poetry or unsure of themselves as readers of it, and as a result they foster inconsistent and misguided notions about the genre, teaching students that

poems have "deeper" meanings than what is literally written on the page. Matthew Zapruder in his recent book, *Why Poetry*, indicates as much when he writes,

> Despite what you might have heard in school, with certain very limited exceptions, poets do not generally deliberately hide meaning, or write one word and really mean another. The stakes are (or should be) too high. Yet so many of us have been taught to read poetry as if its words mean something other than what they actually say (Zapruder, 2017, Kindle Location 532-533).

In fact, in 2012, the State Department of Education in Maryland published a teaching resource that explicitly distinguished between "what a poem said" versus "what a poem meant," asking students to proceed line by line inferring the differences between the two (*Poetry Reading*, 2013). While this resource was intended to help students engage with a poem to introduce a unit, it sent the message to both teachers and students that the poem does not mean what it says, as though it is hiding something or being disingenuous. Why does this happen?
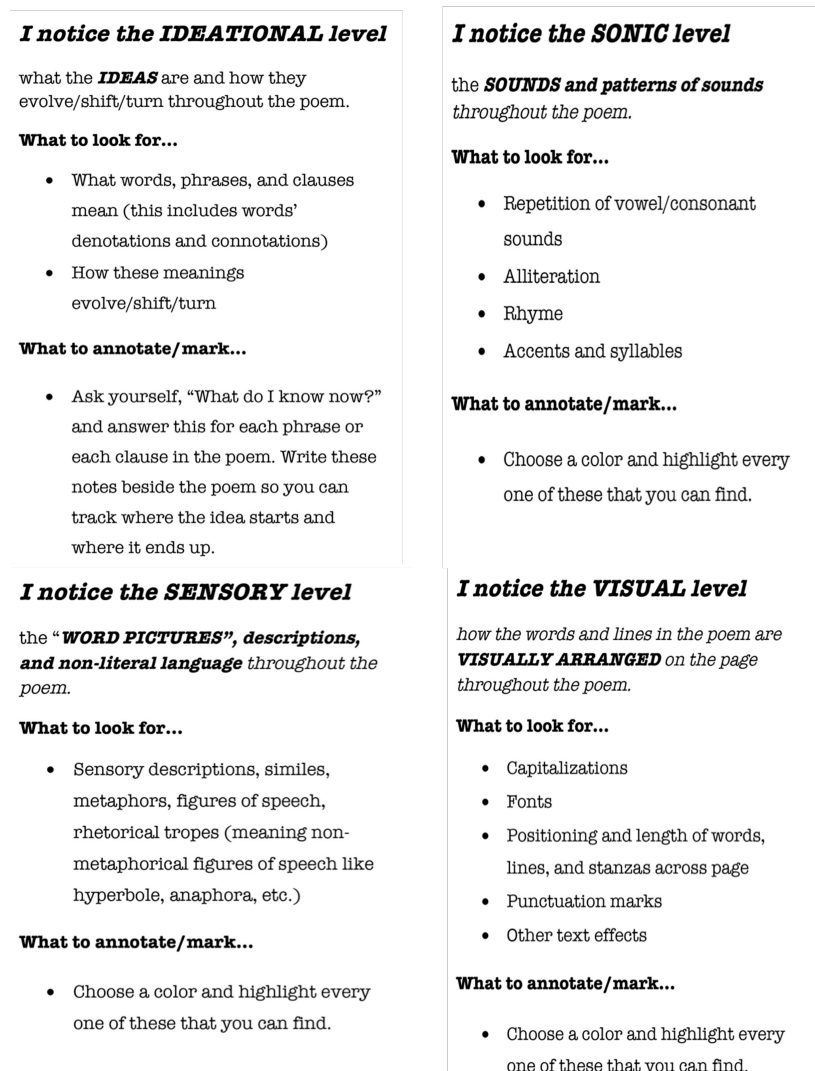
The main problem is two-fold: 1) many well-meaning educators in middle and high schools are not confident (or do not feel themselves to be competent) as readers of poetry, and 2) they communicate this in their teaching of reading poetry to their students in approaches that are scattered, unfocused, and inaccurate. Since these are issues pertaining to comfort with the genre and training in how to engage students with it, the good news is that these problems can be addressed in middle and high school classrooms if teachers help students focus on the language itself, since, as Turco (2012) indicates, "Poetry is the art of language." According to "Noticing Poetry" published on The Academy of American Poets' website, the "I Notice" method

> helps students, particularly those in grades nine and ten, return to an immersion in the language itself, which is essential to being able to read, experience, and appreciate poetry for what it is—language art […] by focusing on the levels in poetry […] students can experience poetry without focusing directly on what poems mean, eventually organically arriving at meaning–making on their own. This helps students avoid, as Billy Collins wrote in his "Introduction to Poetry", "beating [the poem] with a hose/ to find out what it really means" and provides students with an authentic, mindful way of immersing themselves in the language. […]

The method engages students in noticing the four levels of language as adapted from Lewis Turco's definitions of them in *The Book of Forms* and *The Book of Literary Terms* (Turco, 2012), and Michael Theune's concept of the poetic turn in *Structure & Surprise*.

Before the teaching of poetry begins, students are introduced to the concept of levels of language. They receive a packet of four notecards (Figure 1) detailing the levels and their descriptions (Slaby, 2017).

Figure 1

I notice the IDEATIONAL level

what the **IDEAS** are and how they evolve/shift/turn throughout the poem.

What to look for...

- What words, phrases, and clauses mean (this includes words' denotations and connotations)
- How these meanings evolve/shift/turn

What to annotate/mark...

- Ask yourself, "What do I know now?" and answer this for each phrase or each clause in the poem. Write these notes beside the poem so you can track where the idea starts and where it ends up.

I notice the SONIC level

the **SOUNDS and patterns of sounds** *throughout the poem.*

What to look for...

- Repetition of vowel/consonant sounds
- Alliteration
- Rhyme
- Accents and syllables

What to annotate/mark...

- Choose a color and highlight every one of these that you can find.

I notice the SENSORY level

the "**WORD PICTURES**", descriptions, **and non-literal language** *throughout the poem.*

What to look for...

- Sensory descriptions, similes, metaphors, figures of speech, rhetorical tropes (meaning non-metaphorical figures of speech like hyperbole, anaphora, etc.)

What to annotate/mark...

- Choose a color and highlight every one of these that you can find.

I notice the VISUAL level

how the words and lines in the poem are **VISUALLY ARRANGED** *on the page throughout the poem.*

What to look for...

- Capitalizations
- Fonts
- Positioning and length of words, lines, and stanzas across page
- Punctuation marks
- Other text effects

What to annotate/mark...

- Choose a color and highlight every one of these that you can find.

First, each instructor models the method with the entire class with a very short poem by Ezra Pound from The Academy of American Poets website (Slaby 2017), and students and teacher collaboratively produce a sample "I Notice" Poem Level Meter (Figure 2).

Figure 2

bough			
black			
wet			
petals			
crowd		title regularly spaced	
faces		colon shows parallel structure	
Apparition	Black & bough (Alliteration)	2nd line is 2/3 of the 1st line in length	there are petals on the wet black branch
Metro	Crowd & bough (Vowel)	3 longer spaces in each line	ghostly figure of the many people
Station	Petal & wet (vowel)	2 Lines	A poem is in a metro station
these "word pictures" images, sensory descriptions, and non-literal language **(Sensory Level)**	these sounds and patterns of sounds across the poem **(Sonic Level)**	these visual arrangements of words on the page, their font style, and spacing **(Visual Level)**	these ideas and how they evolve from the beginning to end of the poem **(Ideational Level)**

Start filling in here and work your way up with each new example from the poem.

1. This poem functions on which level or levels? _____
2. Describe any connection you see between levels: _____

_____

_____

In subsequent lessons, a variation of a jigsaw activity is used. Students are divided into expert noticing groups, focusing only on one level at a time. When students finish their work noticing as much as they can in these groups, students are placed in a second group, with one "expert noticer" of each level. They then collaboratively fill in their "I Notice" Poem Level Meters. By noticing each level of language in a poem and collaborating by putting them into the "I Notice" Poem Level Meter (Figure 3), students can not only see the dominant language level but also collaboratively make connections across and between levels (Slaby, 2017). This allows students to think about and discuss language at its most fundamental levels and relate the content of these levels to one another. If any meaning is to be made, students do it themselves by looking at what is there within the language itself.

Figure 3

How We Designed Our Inquiry

Scot Slaby, Megan Wall, and Michael Branch, three English teachers at an independent, international, nonprofit school with an American style curriculum, had used the "I Notice" method and "Noticing Poetry" unit in a few classes in previous years. As a team, we designed seven surveys to gauge our one hundred Grade 10 students' levels of engagement with poetry before, during, and after the unit. First, we adapted pre- and post- unit survey questions from the summary findings of the 2006 NORC study, since it contained many relevant questions that could relate to students' experiences in high school. We also added in questions specific to engagement, the "I Notice" method, the unit's activities, and student attitudes about poetry. For our purposes, we looked at which questions would be most applicable to our team's overall inquiry question and adjusted our tools accordingly.

Students then took surveys after every lesson for the course of the month, self-reporting their attitudes toward each poem, each act of noticing, their overall attitudes about poetry, and their own assessment of their engagement. Our Grade 10 English team then met weekly to discuss what we were seeing. However, as the unit concluded, Slaby desired to go further into the data, so he contacted our sister campus' math teacher and data coach colleague, Jordan Benedict, to help with the analysis and data visualizations. Slaby shared all of the data sets with

Benedict, who completed the analysis by mapping the responses from each survey to an integer value. The least favorable response possibility was assigned to the number 1 and each subsequent response possibility assigned to the next integer in order of favorability (i.e., if the possible responses were *Agree, Neutral,* or *Disagree,* the responses were converted to 3, 2, and 1 respectively).

## Pre-Unit Surveys and Discoveries About Students' Attitudes

Prior to our unit, we wanted to know how students perceived their own engagement with poetry. Specifically, we were wondering, "What were our students' experiences with poetry?" and "What were their beliefs about themselves as readers of the genre?" To answer these questions, we kept our initial student survey brief, adapting twelve questions from the 2006 NORC summary. After we collected the student responses, our English team met and discovered that a total of 64 percent of respondents reported either that they were neutral or that they disagreed with the "I like poetry" statement, while 34% of students answered that they liked poetry (Figure 4). A total of 89% of students indicated that they either were neutral or disagreed with the statement that they thought of themselves as good at reading poetry. These responses were consistent with our expectations; from our collective experience we had observed that many students begin to form negative associations about poetry and either view themselves as poor readers of poems or, at the very least, view themselves as neither poor nor good at the reading poems.

Figure 4
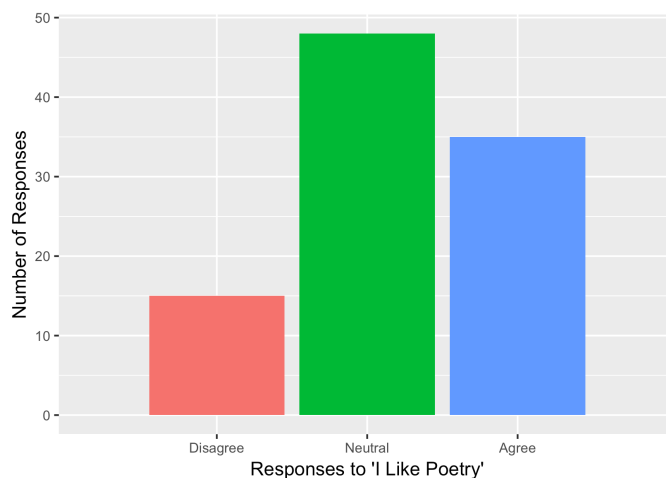
While student responses indicated that they didn't like poetry and didn't feel good about reading poems, they also indicated that they thought poetry and its study were both important, with 87% agreeing to both (Figure 5).

Figure 5
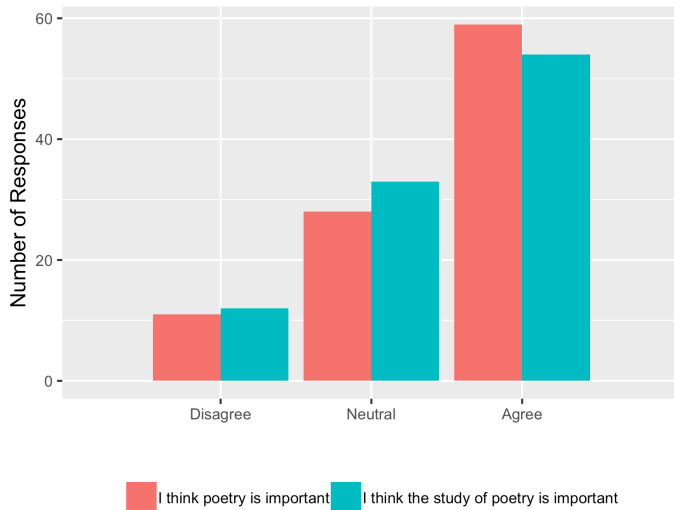
So, while students did not like the genre or necessarily feel good about themselves as readers of it, they still recognized an inherent value in reading and studying poems. This is what the "I Notice" method and the "Noticing Poetry" unit and its activities sought to address – to provide students with positive poetry experiences that focus on immersion in its medium – the language – and to allow for authentic engagement in it. However, what we wanted to know was if "I Notice" and the "Noticing Poetry" unit impacted students' perceptions of themselves as poetry readers and whether or not it affected students' views about poetry itself.

Daily Exit Slips and Discoveries

Each of the English teachers began the unit doing the same lesson as described in the "Noticing Poetry" unit plan (Slaby, 2017). Each day, students used the "I Notice" method to look at a different poem, and we used the jigsaw method to divide students so they examined one level at a time and then all levels together as a group for each poem. We replicated the first lesson from the "Noticing Poetry" unit ("In a Station of the Metro" by Ezra Pound), asking students to fill out only what they noticed about each poem, noticing the language levels as a

class (Slaby, 2017). We stopped them short rushing to meaning-making, which allowed them to focus on what language levels were related to specific ideas. For subsequent lessons, we pre-selected the following poems (all from the 20th century) for students to independently examine with each daily lesson, and the final activity was a student choice of two poems. The progression of poems was:

1. "In a Station of the Metro" by Ezra Pound
2. "The Fog" by Carl Sandburg
3. "A Barred Owl" by Richard Wilbur
4. "Those Winter Sundays" (multiclass and mixed groupings)
5. "On Turning Ten" by Billy Collins or "The Writer" by Richard Wilbur (multiclass)

Following each day's activities, students completed exit surveys to provide data on the "I Notice" method, the activities, and the poems we had selected. The daily Exit Slips consisted of seven questions ranging from "Did you like today's poem?" to "Based on the activity, I am more likely to read a poem on my own." While we looked at the survey data after each lesson, anecdotally, we noticed higher levels of engagement as a result of specific poems. This anecdotal data is supported by a moderately positive correlation (r = 0.4) between "Would you read another poem by this poet" and the pooled responses of the other questions. We discovered that students self-reported that they were highly engaged across the entire unit, citing that they saw value in the work and felt they were becoming better at reading poems with each activity.

Figure 6
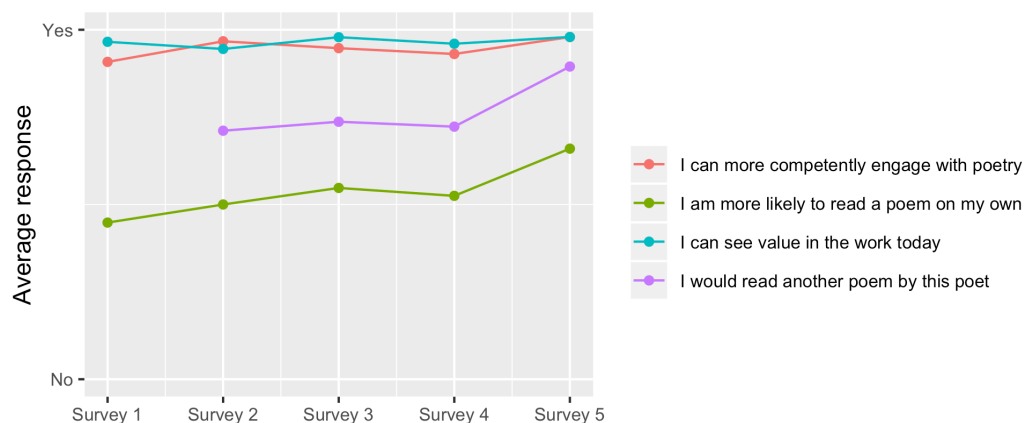
Also, students having a choice of poems increased their desire to read more poems. Looking at Figure 6 above, responses increased significantly for both "Would you read another poem by this poet?" (p = 0.002) and "Based on the activity today, I am more likely to read a poem on my own" (p = 0.05). Most students chose "On Turning Ten" by Billy Collins over "The Writer" by Richard Wilbur. When students had a choice of these poems, they enjoyed the experience more than when they were required to read one specific poem. Such Exit Slips' data trended upward, with students increasingly viewing themselves as readers of poetry by the final activity.

Final Survey and Discoveries

Once students finished the unit, they completed a final survey similar to the one they filled out before beginning the unit. This survey also included three additional questions particular to the "I Notice" method and our unit's activities so that we could understand the overall unit's relationship to students' self-perceptions about their engagement.

While students responded positively to the unit's activities, particularly to those with a jigsaw or group discussion component, the one survey item that students responded to that had some statistical significance was the "I am good at reading poetry" statement. Overall, there appeared to be an increase in students' beliefs in themselves as being "good at reading poetry." This increase was shown through a p-value of 0.1; while this is outside the range of statistical significance, our exploratory data analysis (Figure 7) revealed a slight, but noticeable increase in all results. We therefore decided to run another t-test with pooled responses. Pooling data from all student responses resulted in a p-value of .03, indicating a strong statistical significance. All of the four responses below ("I am good at reading poetry," "I like poetry," "I think poetry is important" and "I think the study of poetry is important") increased from pre- to post- surveys. Overall, there was an increase in positive responses as a whole to the "I Notice" method and the activities of the "Noticing Poetry" unit.

Figure 7
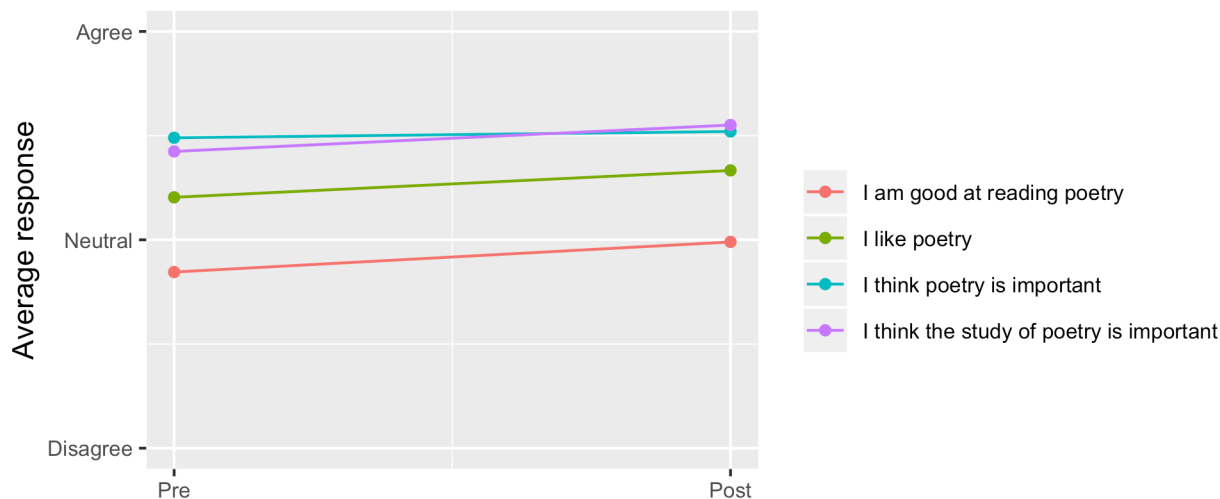
Recommendations and Future Study

Before we began the unit, many of the students were unsure of themselves as readers of poems. Their confidence levels were low, and their engagement in the genre was low, too. Students did not view themselves as being "good at reading poems." By the end of the unit, students shifted in their beliefs about themselves. An overall increase in their engagement with poetry was born out of the work that we did, validating what we had hoped to find: the "I Notice" method and the "Noticing Poetry" activities increased student engagement in reading poems and fostered greater student self-efficacy as readers of poetry. Our plan is to replicate the study in subsequent years and with additional student populations at our school and beyond.

Based upon the success of the "I Notice" methodology and the "Noticing Poetry" unit, other educators should put into practice similar pedagogies that immerse students in the language itself, so that students in middle and high school share in positive experiences with poetry. If teachers do so, they will nurture more readers of poetry and help develop students into more thoughtful, careful readers of literature.

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