

## **How to Create a Collaborative Communal Poem** *by Tracy Rittmueller*

This guide suggests one way to create collaborative communal poetry, through a process I developed in 2014-2015, working with staff and clients of West Bay Residential Services in Rhode Island, as a program to for the adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities served by WBRS. I then tested and refined with Somali-American beginner-level English language learners in 2021.

### **About the method**

***A poet may implement this process alone or with the assistance of a classroom instructor:***

- As the recording poet, your job is to collect the phrases offered by the participants in response to a poem they've read (or heard) together. I have worked primarily with people who have limited language skills. You may want to adapt your questions to the appropriate level of language of your participants.
- Write their responses on a flip pad, scrawl them in a large sketch pad, or type them into a computer document — whatever is most comfortable for you. Feel free to say “Slow down, please.” Or, “Could you repeat that.”
- After the gathering session, use the collected words to create a poem based on the structure of the poem that served as your prompt. Of feel free to let the generated material take you wherever it wants to go. But do try to write in the voice(s) of the people whose words you collected.
- Return the generated poem to the students and instructor. You can also submit the poem to Lyricality for publication.
- Here's a video about the invention and first implementation of the process in Rhode Island: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNlguwrUjI4>
- And here's the book that came out of a year of making collaborative communal poetry at West Bay Residential Services in Rhode Island: <https://www.amazon.com/Thursdays-gladden-Tracy-Lee-Karner/dp/153350170X/>
- To request a free pdf of *Thursdays at 2*, (which may help you develop your own ideas for working with this method) email [LyricalityMN@gmail.com](mailto:LyricalityMN@gmail.com).

**Implement the method (next page)**

## Implement the method

- Begin by understanding the goal. We are trying to bring the unique, individual talents of group members together in collaboration to make a poem that may help them appreciate the wonder, joy and love wrapped up in daily experiences. We want to open their eyes to the important, mysterious truth that although there are superficial differences in our appearances, abilities, thoughts, and opinions, in our essential humanity all of us are very much the same.
- Read the prompting poem to the group and/or show a video of the poet reading.
- Ask questions to elicit responses. If you're working with Louise K. Waakaa'igan's poem "Within," there is a list of questions on *Lyricality's* resources page.
- If those questions aren't generating enough interesting material to work with, probe deeper. Use the phrases generated to ask questions that end with the word *like*. For example: *what does that look like? smell like? sound like? taste like? feel like?* Or, if your group has trouble with abstract concepts (people who have intellectual processing disabilities), ask them *what's your favorite sweet (sour, salty) food? favorite color? name something soft (slippery, cold)? what smells make you happy? what else is that color?*
- Perhaps pick a key word someone has said, and ask for rhyming words. Write down those words.
- Perhaps make a list of words that describe the color, texture, smell, taste, and sound of an object or place. Plug the best of those into your poem.
- Depending on the group, it may be helpful to find a way to appreciate each contribution! Say "good one!" "thank you!" "that's so interesting!" "I never would have thought of that!" "yes!" "beautiful!" If you sincerely value and give reverent attention to every participant, the group will learn to see and listen to one another more carefully.
- The purpose of this activity is to build deeper, more respectful relationships. Therefore it's important to have fun!

*Lyricality*



Read Poetry 2021 is made possible by the voters of Minnesota through a grant from the Central MN Arts Board, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund.