

Guardian



LONDON

*Free with the Guardian every Tuesday:
Schools' briefing plus top teaching jobs*

TUESDAY 14 MAY 1991

POETRY

The art of clear thinking

AMERICAN poet and teacher Carol Burns argues that good poetry not only follows the rules of prose but accentuates them. Because poetry is generally shorter than prose, it is a quick and effective way to teach the art of clear thinking and writing.

Burns teaches poetry-writing at all age levels and runs in-service workshops for teachers in England and the United States. She finds poetry-writing useful in the teacher workshops as a tool for teaching all kinds of writing, because it puts the creative process under a magnifying glass. What passes as mediocrity in prose is glaringly bad in poetry because every word has to be the right one.

The teacher who writes "This doesn't work" on a student's paper may be pressed for time to explain *why* it does not work. In her workshops, Burns shows teachers how to move beyond ill-defined criticism and on to constructive revision by using one-on-one conferences to help the student rewrite. Revision, which Burns spells "Re-Vision", is the key to making the student, often his or her own worst critic, improve the poem. Burns suggests the Socratic method — turning statements into questions (ie "Why did you use that word?" instead of "That's the wrong word") to inspire the right kind of thinking. She stresses that there should be *some* positive feedback no matter how "bad" the poem may appear, because so many students freeze up at the sight of a blank page.

Too many would-be writers, Burns believes, are preoccupied with the mechanics of the poem or start off with abstract ideas. She always begins her lessons with the concrete, by passing around objects such as stones, feathers and seashells. She asks the students to describe them through their senses: their appearance, sound, feel and smell. She then shows how to use metaphor and simile to strengthen the images.

For younger groups she uses the word "comparisons" and plays games that turn the children into clipboard-wielding spies, writing down all the metaphors and similes they hear throughout the day. She will often specifically instruct the class not to use rhymes because younger children will forfeit meaning for sound.

In all her classes Burns has yet to come across a student who was not willing to revise a poem until it was perfect. The length of the work generally matches the attention span of the writer: more than a longer composition and, as such, there is a greater motivation to get everything just right.

Carol Burns can be contacted at 140 Chestnut Street, Weston, MA 02193, USA.

by Michele Kirsch