

## Fun at School - The Class V Blues

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Did you ever hear of an examination that doesn't require any studying? Can there be such a thing as an exam which the students enjoy? Recently a set of Class V students were treated to such a phenomenon.

Maybe you're thinking there must be something wrong - maybe the exam was too easy, maybe it didn't really evaluate the students' true abilities, maybe it wasn't fair. Well, take a look at what happened and judge for yourself how useful it was and whether the students learned anything in the process.

It all started when I was asked to substitute for a Class V English teacher who was ill. The class was supposed to have a creative writing exam. Luckily, I was informed the day before, so I had time to prepare. I decided to let the students write poems. I brought in a cassette player, some tapes of African American blues songs, some poetry books, and we got down to work.

I started by asking the class what the word 'blue' means. By pooling resources they were able to come up with a fairly comprehensive definition, spanning all the way from colour to feeling. I told the class that today we are going to talk about a kind of poetry called Blues, where the word blue means not just the colour blue, but the feeling blue - the melancholy, the sadness, the gloomy, dismal, dreary blues, the sadness that could even be slightly nice, the blue that could be close to black humour, etc. (I didn't dwell on this definition, or clarifying these words however - in fact, the only new word I mentioned that the students hadn't offered themselves was 'melancholy'). All this only took 2 or 3 minutes. It wasn't necessary to give the students a definition of Blues poetry - they would figure out their own meanings after they heard the examples.

I then took about 15 minutes to play and read some examples of blues poetry. I read a few poems by the well known poet from the USA, Langston Hughes, like this one called 'Hope':

Sometimes when I'm lonely,  
Don't know why,  
Keep thinkin' I won't be lonely  
By and by.

And, from his poem 'As Befits a Man':

I don't mind dying -  
But I'd hate to die all alone!

...

Then there was this one by Sonny Terry:

Sometimes I want to holler,  
sometimes I want to shout.  
Sometimes I want to cry,  
and I wonder what about.  
I think I got the blues

(If you can actually sing these poems, it would be an added bonus! At least try to read with a lot of deep feeling.) I also played some examples of blues songs on a cassette player. I repeated a few of the key lines after they were sung, for clarification, but I did not discuss the meaning of any of the poems. I just let them hear a lot of blues. (Some or all of the lines from the songs could be written on charts so that you can point to the words as they are sung, in case it's difficult for the students to hear the words.) I also told the students that the blues is poetry, and in poetry there are no rules. You don't have to rhyme - you don't have to start with a capital letter and end with a full stop - you don't have to have sentences - you can even invent new spellings and new words. Some poets put capital letters in the middle of a sentence or in the middle of a word! Some poets never use any capital letters. I showed them the way

the words

in poems

are spread

over the page

and even without reading them you can see that they are different from stories.

As an example I wrote two lines on the board:

Sittin down by my windowwow

lookin out at the raiaia . . .

I read/sung these, with exaggerated expression.

Then I erased the board and told the students to immediately get to work and write their own blues. I purposely did this because I did not want the students to copy. I wanted them to be original. Of course it would be all right if they remembered a few phrases, and put them to their own uses - which they would be more apt to do if the actual words were erased from the board. In case any student

came up to me complaining, "I can't do it", (which was very rare), I would just tell that in a firm, definite voice that they can do it. I didn't give any student any more encouragement than that. I also told them that they were free to write in whatever language they were most comfortable with. (I had forgotten that this was supposed to be an English examination!)

I left some instrumental blues playing softly in the background, to provide a little atmosphere. They went to work with enthusiasm, and within a few minutes they started excitedly showing me the results. I read them out loud with enthusiasm, or asked the students to read or sing them, and watched as they beamed with delight at what they had accomplished. A few students were literally jumping with joy! As the bell rang, they were all clamouring for more paper and more time to write more poems. They had had a good time. Needless to say, they all got full marks that day. Some of the poems they came up with are shown here.

It's true the students had not memorised the names of any poets, or the lines from any poems. They were never given a list of answers to questions to memorise or copy onto their examination paper. They did not even (consciously) analyse any of the poems that were read to them.

But don't you think they did manage to understand something of the essence of blues poetry? Didn't they learn to express themselves in creative new ways? And haven't they enjoyed poetry? If at least a few of them have been inspired to read and write more poetry don't you think the 'examination' has surpassed its purpose?

## SOME BLUES I READ TO THE CLASS:

Blue can be a colour, but it can also be a feeling.

Did you ever have the blues? If you did you probably felt like sitting in a quiet corner all by yourself and thinking things over. . . . feeling a little sad and melancholy . . . . thinking about how gloomy things are . . . feeling lonely . . . feeling blue . . .

African Americans have made a kind of song called the blues. A famous singer named Mississippi John Hurt sang, 'When you got the blues you can't be satisfied. . .'

Here are some other examples of blues:

Sitting by my window looking out at the rain.  
You know something struck me -  
Clamped on my heart like a ball and chain.  
-Big Mama Thornton

Blues came walking in my room. I said,  
"Blues, please tell me what you are doing  
to make me feel so blue?"  
They looked at me and smiled, but refused to say.  
I seen them again and they turned and walked away.

-Ida Cox

Got the blues so bad, I can hardly sleep at night.  
Tried to eat my meal, my teeth refused to bite.  
-Ora Brown

Soon one morning, the blues knocked on my door.  
"Come here to stay with you, won't be leaving no more."

-Mance Lipscomb

Big boss man,  
can't you hear me when I call?  
You ain't so big.  
You just tall, that's all.  
-Jimmy Reed

Can't tell my future, can't tell my past.  
It seems like every minute sure gonna be my last.  
-Willie Brown

I don't care how rich you are,  
don't care what you're worth.  
When it all comes down,  
you gotta go back home to Mother Earth.  
-Memphis Slim

Folks, I'm telling you,  
birthing is hard  
and dying is mean -  
so get yourself  
a little loving  
in between.  
-Langston Hughes

### Late Last Night

Late Last Night I  
Set on my steps and cried.  
Wasn't nobody gone,  
Neither had nobody died.

I was cryin'  
Cause you broke my heart in two.  
You looked at me cross-eyed  
And broke my heart in two -

So I was cryin'  
On account of  
You!  
-Langston Hughes

## Class V Blues

[all the following poems were written by Class V students in Chandigarh on 17th Sept 1998]

### The rain

[Chorus]

Sitting by the window  
looking at the rain  
I thought  
I would die  
like the rain dies  
- when it smashes in the ground

1. When I would die  
The blues would go away  
- When I'm in the grave
2. I'd like my man's  
dad's  
photo beside my grave  
photo beside my grave
3. Layin in my grave  
would be boring  
So,  
I'd like my fun photo's  
When I am in my grave  
When I'm in my grave  
- Mohit

### Cool it!!!

Wake up in the morning,  
Cool it.  
Go to school  
Cool it.  
Skip down the lane  
Cool it.  
If anyone troubles you,  
Cool it.  
If anyone slaps you,  
**On my way**

I was going on my way  
When she looked at me in my way  
In the park, that green park  
She met me, on my way  
What a beauty she was looking  
When she met me in my way  
She's a beauty, She's a beauty  
When I looked on her face  
Oh my baby, you're my baby  
I can't get away from you  
Oh my baby, you my baby  
I'm missing you on my way  
la, la, la la la la la la la la la

-Bhaskar

Ah! Stop it!  
If anyone loves you,  
Cool it.  
Make friends and just,  
Cool it.  
Stay cool all day,  
Cool it.  
Stay cool all week,  
Cool it.  
Stay cool all year,  
Cool it.  
Stay cool all life,  
Cool it.  
आरे भाया, Cool it.  
Cool it, Cool it, Cool it, Cool it Man.

-Mehak

Oh! . . . There's a cockroach in my  
dae, ae, esk  
But he ain't gonna be no more . . .  
cause I'm gonna swap him  
and I'm gonna throw  
him in my bae, a, in . . .  
Oh! he ain't gonna be no more . . .

Oh! oh oh I'm nothing oh oh oh  
I'm nothing.  
I'm thinkin' about  
sittin'  
or sleeping up in my grave.  
I gonna get through o'  
through  
o' through.

-Gurbani

### Waitin for the bus

Waitin' For the bus  
Sittin on a bench  
With a boy by my side.  
Givin me a scornful look by his eye.  
I said, 'Hello young fellow,'  
But nothing came out of his mouth.  
Got on the bus  
He said, 'Get off Marsh Mellow.'

- Nikhil

### rainyday

Its raining Its raining  
the sky is crying sky is crying  
All the children are happy children are happy  
But sky is crying Oh children dont be happy  
the sky is crying  
the marriage of the sky and earth is broken.  
the sky is crying.  
Its raining Its raining

- Pukhraj

### **My Kichen Fire**

SiTTiN Next to the kichen fire near a window  
THought I could  
Sit a little more  
But Lot of  
work on my  
head  
Cold wind in my hair  
Trees whistling loud  
and I next to my kichen Fire.  
Just me and the kichen Fire.  
Closed my eyes  
dreamed about someone  
Forgot and every thing.

- Navratan

### **Funny waters**

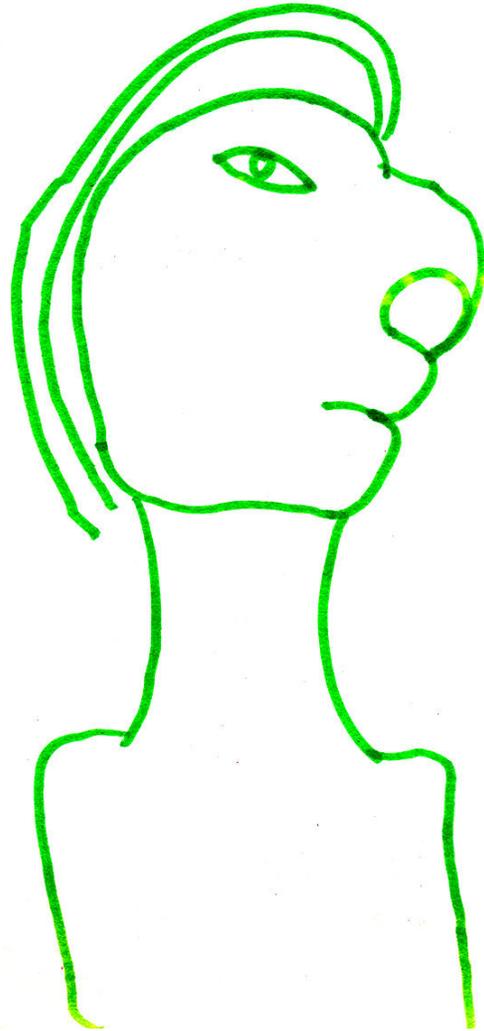
Sittin on the controll panel  
of a ship  
I ate my cake and  
drank my coke  
I thought I am sailing  
through the water and  
surfing along  
I put the ship on it's own  
and fell a sleep  
When I woke up I was  
Where I started!  
I thought I had been around  
the world  
But when I looked back  
I was tied to the port  
    tied to the port  
        tied to the port

By Popye the sailor  
- Sushane (Class V B)

### **Night**

OH! NIGHT! OH NIGHT  
WHY DO YOU Come EVERYDAY  
WHY ARE YOU BLACK NOT RED  
WHY DO YOU HAVE STARS ON YOU  
NOT ICE CREAMS  
OH! night when YOU COME  
CHILDREN  
FEEL Afraid!  
WHY ARE YOU SCARY  
OH! OH NIGHT WHY DO YOU  
COME

- Suraj Preet (Class V C)



## Lesson Plan: Blues Poetry

### Lesson Objectives:

- To enjoy poetry
- To get a feeling for a kind of poetry that may have been quite foreign and different from anything the students have heard before
- To learn that it's fun to write poetry
- To find out that you can exercise a lot of freedom when you write poetry - you don't have to follow the 'rules'

### Box 4:

#### History

It's not really necessary to give any historical explanation about the Blues, but if desired this lesson could be combined with an American History lesson on African Americans.

Some of the points that could be discussed in such a lesson are:

- In the 16th and 17th centuries, a number of great civilisations existed in Western Africa: Muslim Empires, Mali, Songhay, Benin, etc. At the same time, Europe depended on Africa for gold, and took Africans as slaves. When Europeans started colonising the Americas, they took African slaves there to farm, mine, and do other kinds of work.
- By the 1800's millions of African slaves had been forced to America, mostly to work on plantations growing cotton, tobacco, sugar beets, rice, coffee, and sugarcane. Many of them died as they were imprisoned and shipped in inhumane conditions.
- Africans were sold in cruel auctions, as if they were cattle. Husbands were separated from wives, and children were taken away from their parents to work on different plantations. Even 5 and 6 year old children were made to work.
- Slaves did not get paid for their work. They were only given minimum essentials of food, clothing and shelter.
- Slaves were severely punished if they refused to work or tried to run away. They were whipped and chained with iron shackles on each leg. Nevertheless, Africans kept resisting slavery, in whatever ways they could.
- Since Africans were separated from each other, mixed with people from different parts of Africa, and punished if they refused to speak the language or join the religion of their owners, they forgot some of their own languages, cultures, and ways of living. But some of their old ways got mixed with the new ways.
- Especially in music, some of the old African traditions were kept. African styles were combined with European styles to get new kinds of music. One such kind of music was 'Blues'. In Blues, African Americans could express their feelings, problems, and hopes.

Instead of just lecturing the class about these things, there are many more interesting ways they could be taught. They could be told stories about African slaves. They could read actual accounts written by slaves. They could be shown pictures and photographs. They could be asked to compare historical sources that give different points of view. And they could be asked to think about why people acted the way they did. There are a number of good books available as resources for teachers, including The People's History of The United States, by Howard Zinn, African Peoples of the Americas, by Ron Field (Cambridge University Press), The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglas, edited by Philip Foner (International Publishers), and To Be A Slave, by Julius Lester (Scholastic).