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## **Moving Poems: Kinesthetic Learning in the Literature Classroom**

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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From the Classroom

Moving Poems:

# Kinesthetic Learning in the Literature Classroom

Virginia Zimmerman

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Stressed and unstressed syllables pounded in my head as I struggled to plan the lesson on meter for my introduction to poetry. Meter is so difficult to teach effectively that many English professors bypass it altogether. Those of us who persist rely on triple-spaced short poems cluttered with dashes and slashes; we might lead our students in a round of exaggerated chanting or measured clapping. If we are lucky, half of the students will perform the scansion exercise reasonably well on the final exam, and one or two may incorporate an insight about meter into an analytic essay. When I had designed my syllabus, I had planned to trudge through "meter week" with a brave face and the familiar battery of exercises. Yet as early March approached and a serious midsemester slump cast a pall over the class, I was determined to try something new. Influenced by a workshop on experiential education, I brought kinesthetic learning into my literature classroom, and my students, literally moved by meter, leaped to a richer understanding and appreciation of poetry than I had imagined I could offer.

Experiential education means a lot of things, from wilderness training through Outward Bound to role-playing in psychotherapy, from constructing business models out of toothpicks to studying Shakespeare through puppetry. Of course, everything—from reading a poem to writing an essay to staging a debate—is an experience, but experiential education relies on distinctive experiences. Faced with the unexpected, the novel, or the dangerous, students achieve a heightened awareness of the subject matter and its value. Students in an introduction-to-poetry course expect to experience the act of reading poetry, but they do not expect to play charades, jump up and down **[End Page 409]** in class, form human lines of poetry, or play meter tag, all active-learning strategies that I have developed for my classes. These kinesthetic exercises have given my students rare insights into how poetry works and, at the same time, have established a valuable sense of community among the students.

Experiential learning, invoked as early as the 1930s, has not been integrated into mainstream academe, though many of us inadvertently apply its leading principle: "Genuine education comes about through experience" (Dewey 1997: 25). We moderate debates and conduct field trips, but few of us discuss experiential education. Searches in the major databases reveal a surprising dearth of theorizing about the value of experiential or even active learning in college pedagogy. The preference for active participation in class discussion over passive absorption of information, for example, has become almost a cliché, yet few people have explored the broader possibilities of experiential education. Steve Chapman et al. (1995: 236) are among the exceptions: "Whatever is being studied, the point is to place students into a different, more direct relationship with the material. Students are actively engaged—exploring things for themselves—rather than being told answers to questions." Especially in introductory courses, students often feel distant from poetry, and activities designed to establish a more direct relationship between the student and the poem facilitate learning.

I first experimented with active, experiential learning on a whim. Frustrated one day with an unusually slow class and fearing a midsemester slump, I decided on a kinesthetic exercise to shake up the class. I asked the students to stand in front of their desks. They were wary but intrigued: as soon as I made an unexpected demand, they became more alert and engaged, wondering what would come next. I improvised a short narrative about striding across a plain and coming to a rut. As they realized what I was up to, some of the students began to smile; their mood suddenly changed from lethargy to anticipation. I exhorted the class to jump over the rut on the count of three: some students thought that the exercise was silly; others took my

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