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America in Verse: The Laureate Project

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America In Verse: The Laureate Project

Abstract:

The purpose of this project is to allow students to use their (developing) skills of poetic explication and close reading, combined with research and analysis, to discover and establish a solid case for a poet they will nominate as the next American Poet Laureate. Working in groups of 3-4, students will identify a published, living American poet who has not yet been designated a laureate. The project demands a wide array of skills as the students research bibliographic information on the poet: read and analyze the poet's body of work and select one central poem to represent that poet; amass their materials into a cogent group presentation and, if desired, individually or collectively write an essay in which they present their analysis and justifications. The English Team at IMSA presents this at the end of the sophomore year American Literature sequence, but it could be given where most appropriate for a specific class.

Common Core Standards:

SL.9-10.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.9-10.2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

W.11-12.1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

W.11-12.9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

W.11-12.10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes.

Procedure:

The Laureate Project is best administered as a sort of "cumulative" or "capstone" project—after students have been given sufficient introduction to poetry basics, and feel comfortable analyzing and developing their own suppositions of poetry independently of a class structure. Additionally, being comfortable with language of poetic criticism is also necessary. We would suggest it, on its own, does not serve as an adequate introduction to understanding poetry, as so much of it is self-guided and selected by the student.

Once the students are in groups, they can be directed to the Library of Congress website (<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/>) where information on the Poet Laureate position can be found, as well as the list of past Laureates, and bibliographic and publication information on the current Laureate. The class may find useful a short lecture and subsequent discussion on what standards are utilized to select America's Poet Laureate, and what elements they might consider. Questions such as: Who is the targeted audience? Who reads poetry? What are some themes that might

appeal to a wide variety of Americans? may be helpful, especially as students begin to make their own selections.

Besides the groups selecting and nominating poets, 2-3 students will comprise a group known as the Senators. The Senators will be in charge of carefully reading the selected poetry samples, coming up with a rubric by which to assess the presentations, and, ultimately, selecting the next (class) Poet Laureate.

The specifications for nominees are a poet about whom at least minimal biographical information is discoverable: date/place of birth; education; career; current residence. The poet must have at least some published scholarly critical commentary on his or her work. Some groups may try to nominate musical artists, citing rap or other song lyrics as poetry. One helpful stipulation may be to say that the nominee's *primary* genre must be published poetry.

Once each team has identified their poet, they will need to submit the poet's name and two samples of work. Students are instructed that the poet's are "first come, first served" to the instructor, so finding a suitable candidate and submitting the name soon is beneficial. No more than one group in a class should present on the same poet.

The teams will read and re-read the work of their candidate, identifying the qualities they think make the author Laureate material (thus knowing the criteria by which Library of Congress makes their selection is paramount). They should discuss the poet's work using the language of poetic criticism, and decide what qualities of "American-ness" are present in this poet's work, and—ultimately—what makes them a suitable and strong Laureate candidate.

An often illuminating and entertaining option is also to require that students contact their selected nominee early in the process, explain the project, and seek the poet's insights on either a specific poem, or their artistic process as a whole. Students sometimes receive responses from poets, which allow them to enter into a highly educational discourse with an author as well as develop different communication skills. While not every group will receive a response, many will.

Decisions on presentation requirements or format can be made by the instructor. Some beneficial requirements might be to have the teams submit their selected poem to the Senator group and the instructor a specific amount of time prior to their scheduled presentation, so adequate time can be given to analyze it. A time frame for each presentation may also be beneficial, depending on the size of the group and amount of class time that can be given over to the presentations. Twenty minutes may be a good length, which includes five minutes at the conclusion for questions from the Senators and audience. Instructors can indicate specific areas they require. In their presentations, students should demonstrate: biographical background of the poet and the potential relevance to the poet's work; their understanding of the poem they selected; their ability to clearly communicate that meaning to their classmates; their own interpretation of the specific character of an American, and how their poet/work demonstrates that.

Essay Portion:

If desired, an essay can also be required that each group member writes individually. This will summarize the case made for the Poet Laureate candidate. The paper should interweave relevant biographical material, the student's own critical commentary, commentary on the poet from published sources, and the specific indicators of the American character of the work.

Role of the Senators:

The role of the Senators can be determined by the instructor. Depending on the class, the Senators can be given a fair bit of control over the “hearings” of the candidate selection. If class time is given over to group work, the Senators can use this time to work on developing a rubric by which to judge each group—which should be then shared and discussed with the entire class. Because the Senators receive the poem before each group’s presentation, they should come to the presentations prepared with several questions on the poem or the poet. During each presentation, they should take notes and be prepared to ask critical questions. After the presentations are concluded, the Senators will meet and decide on the new Poet Laureate, and be prepared to offer a rationale for their choice. An essay for the Senator group members should include: their rubric for selecting their Laureate; the process by which they came to a consensus for the rubric; their observations about previous Laureates; and a summation of their deliberations that led to their choice.

Materials:

When first introducing the project, because of the various components, either distribute copies of the prompt or project the prompt to discuss it with the students.

It is beneficial if the students have direct access to scholarly journals via a library—either paper or electronic (such as JSTOR or Academic Search Premier) and a knowledge of how to search through and select relevant sources.