

Teaching Haiku in Higher Education: An Immersion into the Living Tradition

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October 4, 2001

Twenty-six college students sit in a large circle, excitedly whispering to friends about our anticipated visitors. It is 10:00 AM on Friday, April 14, 2000. Having just arrived at Millikin University for the Global Haiku Festival, our guests enter the classroom still exchanging greetings and sharing news of their latest writing projects or forthcoming books of haiku. The students murmur with recognition and excitement—there's George Swede, the silver-haired Canadian they recognize from the dust jacket photograph on his collection of haiku, *Almost Unseen*. A couple of young women giggle, recognizing their favorite romantic haiku poet, the clean-shaved Michael Dylan Welch. And who is that interesting looking British fellow with the haiku hat? Oh, Peter Mortimer, the publisher of Iron Press.

The haiku poets find seats in the circle, shoulder to shoulder with my students, who are visibly eager to ask questions and to hear tales about the life of poetry from some of the leading contemporary writers, editors and scholars on English-language haiku. After introductions of our nine guests, the first question sets off a lively discussion that leads into a variety of current issues related to the art of haiku. Then the hour is suddenly gone. My students are reminded to fully participate in the weekend haiku festival—attend lectures, write haiku during the ginko, read at the open-mic reading—and several students plan to seek out certain authors for a personal conversation or interview.

Obviously we cannot host a Global Haiku Festival every year at my university, but immersing college students into the living tradition of contemporary haiku can remain as one of the most important goals of teaching haiku in higher education. To implement this goal, at least two or three haiku poets are invited to Millikin University each year for a short workshop and reading. It helps a great deal that my haiku reading partner, Lee Gurga, the associate editor of *Modern Haiku*, lives only a short distance from Millikin and often has haiku visitors. The haiku journals such as *Haijinx* and *Heron's Nest* and web sites of organizations like the *World Haiku Association*, *The Haiku Society of America* and the *Shiki Haiku Salon* provide my students with a glimpse of the haiku community. Also, each student conducts an in-depth study of a single contemporary author, borrowing books from my personal collection. These single author studies result in a web profile and reader response essay, often based on a personal interview with the author by email or correspondence. This allows students to receive a sense of the living tradition of the contemporary haiku community even when there is no festival on campus.

The primary goal of my haiku courses are for my students to experience the joys of reading

and writing haiku, to appreciate the discipline necessary to achieve excellence in the art, and to understand the historical traditions of haiku as a genre—including its Japanese origins and the major developments of the genre by various Japanese and other haiku writers. My goal is to introduce them to the world of haiku and its aesthetically related poetry—tanka, senryu, haibun, renga and zen poetry. And I want the students to understand what it means to be an active member of the haiku community, a world-wide community of dedicated literary artists devoted to serious artistic development of themselves and haiku as a unique literary genre.

So what are the haiku courses I teach and how have they been developed at Millikin University?

First, let me share a little bit about the context of the university sponsoring these courses. Millikin University is a small, private university in Decatur, Illinois with about 2400 residential students enrolled in four colleges—Fine Arts, Arts & Sciences, Nursing and Business. We have a very strong music, theatre and visual arts curriculum which celebrates hard-working student performers. Each of these colleges take pride in Millikin's emphasis on experiential learning and advanced learning opportunities for its students through research or performance partnerships with faculty in the faculty member's area of expertise. So it was quite natural for me to share my passion for haiku and my involvement in the haiku community as a writer, editor and publisher with my students.

Millikin University has a long tradition of integrating theory and practice—a combination of intellectual inquiry and practical application of knowledge in creative performance. So from the very first conception of the haiku courses, I knew I wanted to integrate reading about the historical tradition with the dynamic artistic struggle of writing, editing and publishing original haiku. I wanted to establish the art of haiku as a campus tradition through events open to the public—with readings, exhibits, guest speakers, festivals on campus—so that my students and their work would be publicly appreciated and embraced as another example of excellent student performance at Millikin. In addition to live performances and exhibits in the art galleries, my students' work is also publicly available through the *Millikin University Haiku Web Site* located at: <http://www.millikin.edu/haiku>

I offer three levels of haiku study at Millikin: (1) a haiku writing roundtable workshop, (2) a global haiku traditions course, and (3) advanced publishing internships and independent study projects.

The Haiku Writing Roundtable Workshop.

The first level is a one-credit course called the "Haiku Writing Roundtable" which students may take up to three times. This workshop includes weekly haiku readings, an introduction to zen aesthetics, and ten approaches to writing haiku. The ten approaches include:

- 1 on the spot writing
- 2 reader response associations
- 3 ginko haiku hike
- 4 Zazen meditation

- 5 western visualization meditation
- 6 imagination
- 7 consonance as the genesis of haiku
- 8 dissonance as the genesis of haiku
- 9 senryu
- 10 collaborative rengay (Garry Gay's approach)

The main activity of the roundtable is our weekly editing session and frequent haiku competitions (*kukai*) on given season-words or topics. Each week students submit 5-10 haiku to me and I select some for review and edits by the entire class. The students receive a print out of the selected haiku seeking responses, select 3-4 favorites through the blind review process (anonymous writers) and prepare responses. Then in the editing session, we begin by "giving birth" to favorite haiku and discovering the "parent" of the favorite haiku. I offer haiku books or haiku magazines as awards to the authors of the haiku that receive the most votes.

After favorites have been fully celebrated and enjoyed, we enter into the editing session—asking questions, suggesting alternatives, moving lines, seeking a more effective word, and so on. We edit the anonymous haiku and the author may claim it as their own or leave it as anonymous if they wish. Students whose haiku have been selected as favorites may also solicit edit suggestions if they are still dissatisfied with their current version of the haiku.

Millikin offers the Haiku Writing Roundtable each fall semester. Many students enroll in the course more than once, which creates an excellent combination of experienced and novice haiku writers—establishing their own campus community of students who enjoy reading and writing haiku. This workshop is officially listed as a first year level course, so freshman students can feel welcome in the workshop their very first semester.

The Global Haiku Traditions Course.

Each spring Millikin offers The Global Haiku Traditions as a three-credit course. It is a junior-level course cross-listed as either (1) a "Global Studies" course fulfilling a general education requirement or (2) an "Advanced Studies in Poetry" course fulfilling a literature requirement for English majors. Although usually about half of the students are English majors, I am especially glad that the course is quite popular with students from all disciplines. Just as the contemporary haiku community includes people from all walks of life—scientists, politicians, dentists, business executives, technical writers, naturalists, editors, professors—the Global Haiku Traditions course includes students from all disciplines and majors.

In this course, students engage in a more extensive study of the origins and history of haiku traditions and they continue writing their own original haiku considering the approaches and techniques from various traditions. The plural "traditions" is a key component of the course as students consider the competing approaches of various schools in the history of Japanese haiku, and the variations of the haiku as a living genre that has spread and changed throughout the world in different cultures.

The course begins with reading and sharing our reader's responses to haiku. We share the

various places our imaginations go from the same starting haiku. We share the associations and memories that haiku stimulate in us as we read them. And as we formulate a better understanding of haiku, we also refine our abilities as readers of haiku. Throughout the semester, students develop a reader response approach to criticism, learning to consider historical contexts but also trusting their own imagined responses as readers of haiku (or at least the translations they have available). Throughout their reading, they are encouraged to seek out favorite haiku, consider why those are their favorites, and to establish their own criteria of excellent or significant haiku as both readers and writers. After studying Bashô in depth, students use the critical method of "matching contests" to write a comparison study of two authors (often from different cultures, different time periods, or different schools of practice). To see examples of these matching haiku comparison essays, please visit the *Millikin Haiku Web Site*.

In addition to historical studies, the students read a great deal of contemporary English-language haiku and contemporary haiku from Japan and other countries. I have already discussed this part of the course, based on interviews and an extensive research of a single author. These studies are presented to the entire class during the last week of the course, and the resulting profiles and essays are often published on the web site.

Fridays are usually devoted to an editing workshop on original haiku by the students in the Global Haiku Traditions course. As most members of the haiku community know, haiku stimulate our imaginations and our aesthetic memories and triggered associations. They make us feel and think again about our own lives. So it is quite natural that students want to write their own haiku as part of their critical response to reading haiku. The Friday workshops are conducted in a manner similar to the Haiku Writing Roundtable, with students reviewing anonymous haiku attempts and "giving birth" to celebrated favorites.

The main difference between the Roundtable workshop and the Global Haiku Traditions workshop is that there are usually about 30 students in the Global Traditions course, so it is difficult for each student to receive the benefits of the full-class editing process. We all vote on favorites and celebrate the best haiku written each week, but it is hard to establish a good reader response critical process for each student with a large class.

From personal experience, I know how valuable a small group of trusted readers can be when working on a collection of haiku. At Brooks Books, when we are editing a book of selected works by an author, it is not uncommon for us to send the haiku being considered to 5-8 readers for selection, evaluation, edit suggestions and arrangement strategies. I wanted to provide the students with the same opportunity for collaborative critical exchanges around their own original collection of haiku. In order to provide each student with a strong on-going critical review process, I divide the class into small editing groups. Each editing group exchanges their work with each other and writes imagined responses to the haiku. Although the primary task of the editing groups is to work on each other's original haiku, they also take up issues and questions in response to their readings. However, the main task that energizes and focuses the groups is that each student must create a collection of their own original haiku by the end of the semester. The groups provide support and encouragement in this task.

I also know the value of having a "haiku buddy" or trusted reader who examines your own work in progress and gives honest responses, questions and critical suggestions. I have been blessed with three such relationships in my twenty-five years of work in haiku. First, I mailed Raymond Roseliep most of my rough works which he diligently responded to, teaching me a great deal about my own haiku writing limitations and possibilities. Second, I was mentored in tanka writing for several years by Sanford Goldstein, the professor at Purdue University who introduced me to Japanese literature and zen aesthetics. And now, Lee Gurga and I meet once a month to share and review our works before submitting them to publications or contests. In order to encourage this type of relationship among the students in the Global Haiku Traditions, each student finds a "haiku buddy" to read all of their original work, and to help select haiku to be included in their final chapbook collection of best haiku written. The haiku buddy also is responsible for writing an introduction to the collection—a critical preface highlighting some of the best haiku in the collection and preparing readers to truly appreciate and enjoy their friend's work. Again, you may see selected haiku from these collections at the *Millikin Haiku Web Site*, including some designated haiku reader's introductions.

Students in the Global Haiku Traditions also seek reader responses to their work from other students and strangers and family members, as part of their process of selecting which haiku to include in their final collections. This process of seeking responses from others who do not know the haiku tradition is very informative and helps the students learn the value of haiku to convey feelings and insights even to the "untrained" reader. This is another way in which the course creates a public presence and shared enthusiasm for haiku across campus. The students become ambassadors for haiku, teaching their readers to appreciate and enjoy their work.

The small groups also provide opportunities for collaborative writing. The student groups often write rengay or more traditional renku or sponsor a haiku competition for the entire campus. These collaborative writing activities harken back to the origins of haiku and help students appreciate the use of collaborative imagination. It also provides another means of drawing other students and friends into the fun of haiku.

Advanced Publishing Internships & Independent Study Projects.

For students who wish to continue their studies of haiku beyond the Roundtable and Global Traditions courses, I can offer more individualized advanced opportunities. Students interested in learning more about literary editing and publishing often choose to serve as a student editor interning with Brooks Books. The publishing interns help with current Brooks Books editing and publishing projects. For example, photography student Julie Lycan and writing major Jeremy Coulter collaborated on the design of Paul O. William's collection of haiku, *Outside Robins Sing* (1999), a beautiful hand-sewn accordion fold chapbook. Several of the online haiku collections, including Michael Dylan Welch's *Open Window* and Lee Gurga's *Long Walk Alone* have been designed with the assistance of student editor interns.

Over my last ten years at Millikin, several students have chosen to do special independent studies or honors projects related to haiku. For example, a recent honors student graduate, Kristin Boryca, spent three semesters reviewing the history of poetics and aesthetics—both the

Western and Eastern traditions—resulting in a study of Zen aesthetics in haiku and an original collection of her work. Her collection of haiku, *A Day's Breath*, and her personal statement of haiku poetics are available online at the web site.

How the Semester Ends

We conclude each semester by holding various public celebrations of students' research, their collections of haiku, and their reading partnerships. Students present their research to the class and share comparative studies with other reading groups. Favorite haiku from weekly workshops and some essays are added to the *Millikin Haiku Web Site*. But the big event is a public poetry reading. Each student (with the help of their haiku buddy) carefully selects their best work for the haiku reading. They invite friends, family and other faculty to the reading, which usually has a large turnout.

A final requirement of the course is to prepare a submission to one of the haiku journals. Each student brings at least one submission in a properly addressed envelope including a self-addressed, stamped envelope or international reply coupon. As mundane as this may seem, students do need to know how to properly submit their work, and they need a little push to go through the gateway to the larger global haiku community . . . submitting their work to editors so that it can be shared and enjoyed by readers of the journals and haiku web sites. For some students, this will be the only step into that world of haiku publications, but for others it will be the first step with many return visits expected in the future.

On the last day of class, students bring their completed collections (in various bindings or media) for presentation to the class. Each student also brings a gift exchange featuring their "signature haiku," the haiku they want to be known by. The signature haiku is one of their best haiku, which they want people to remember as an example of their work. Or it is one that best represents their values and their own approach to writing haiku. The signature haiku is used as an example among friends whenever the question about "what is haiku?" comes up. These exchanges are the final act of community bonding in the class—an exchange of haiku gifts. What better lesson to end with but that haiku is a joyous gift to be shared.

Can the Millikin program serve as a model for haiku studies at other institutions?

I believe that the model of integrating reading and writing experiences is central to haiku studies. Haiku call for imaginative response, so reading haiku leads naturally to writing haiku. And whether the students are excellent haiku writers or not is not the key issue. The key issue is whether they understand the possibilities of participating in the art of haiku as a genre. To truly understand this genre I believe you must be both reader and writer.

Unfortunately, too many teachers treat haiku writing as merely an exercise in form—writing any message in 5-7-5 syllables, so students "learn" that haiku is a strange, busy-work diversion. This form emphasis so misses the point of haiku—that sensory images connect to our perceptions which connect to our memories and human feelings. Haiku are about sharing consciousness and awareness. Haiku are about becoming more aware of your world and the

moments of your life that offer significant insights. The emphasis on form kills the joy of reading and writing haiku. Reading and sharing reader responses is an essential element of the haiku learning experience.

Another portion of the Millikin program that can be effectively modeled is the emphasis on public performance. Students need to see the impact of their work on others, and they need the feeling of pride that comes when others appreciate their work. And like football and dance and music and art exhibits, the public sphere immediately increases the stakes and motivation of the students to perform at their best. Students work hard on their haiku, not just for a grade or to please the teacher, but because they know others will see and watch and applaud their work in public. The public performance element is also an important form of outreach and support for the courses from the entire campus community.

Although all teachers may not have the same extent of involvement in the global haiku community as I do through my publishing and writing activities, students can gain access to the haiku community through haiku journals, web sites, haiku associations and direct contact with active members of the haiku community. Haiku is very popular around the world so it should not be difficult to find members of that community near your school. And with appropriate funding, others would be willing to come for readings or workshops at your school for reasonable honorariums.

Haiku studies are an important part of the curriculum for all levels of education. Students learn so much about the power of language to express feelings and to capture perceptions. In addition to gaining expertise with images in writing, haiku studies provide a glimpse into the possibilities of a joyous lifelong journey with this literary art. The global haiku traditions remain committed to the anonymous writer, the value of one haiku, the invitation that any one of us—with dedication and commitment and work—can write haiku of significance. Haiku studies bring poetry out of the classroom and into lives.

For me, one of the greatest values of teaching an immersion approach to haiku studies in higher education is that it heals two serious wounds common to current English studies. First, it integrates reading and writing within the context of rich, competing traditions of haiku as a global genre. Second, it connects poetry back to the common man. Instead of emphasizing esoteric knowledge or academic elitist trends, contemporary haiku still insists on evoking meaning and appealing to a broad range of readers—both the literary intellectual as well as the every day person. Haiku work on both levels. The literary reader recognizes the literary allusions and the significant historical nuances in the haiku. The common reader recognizes the feelings and memories and associations from their own life in the haiku. This makes haiku ideally suited for higher education which tries to serve both the experts and the general public.

Finally, I would like to say that perhaps the best reason for offering haiku studies at all levels of education is simply that it is so much fun.

Publication citation:

"Teaching Haiku in Higher Education: An Immersion into the Living Tradition—the Case of Millikin University."
World Haiku Review 1.3, The World Haiku Club, (Oxford, England) November 2001.

Ten haiku poems written (and chosen) by yourself.

grandpa drags his daybed
to the front porch . . .
mockingbird's songs

*

empty farm wagon
a cell phone
buzzing under the hay

*

lock out . . .
workers burn the editorials
to warm their hands

*

autumn rain . . .
the last of the dust
brought to earth

*

hands on the rail . . .
the humpback whale

doesn't resurface

*

the homestead cedars . . .
our toy cars follow a dirt road
through fallen needles

*

creek water warm . . .
I swing the grapevine
up to my cousin

*

missing in action...
she dusts off his guitar,
returns it to the shelf

*

funeral procession . . .
snowflakes blowing
into the headlights

*

two lines in the water . . .
not a word between
father and son

(please edit the following bio as needed)

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About the Author

Dr. Randy Brooks directs the writing major at Millikin University, a private university in Decatur, Illinois, USA. He and his wife, Shirley Brooks, have been co-editors and publishers of Brooks Books, (formerly High/Coo Press) and currently edit *Mayfly*

magazine. Dr. Brooks and his wife have been dedicated to publishing books, magazines and hypertext collections of haiku in English since 1976 when they founded High/Coo Press.

In April 2000 he and Dr. Lee Gurga organized a gathering of haiku poets, editors and scholars at the Global Haiku Festival hosted by Millikin University, the Sister Cities Program and the Haiku Society of America.

Dr. Brooks has won many awards for his haiku and haiku publishing including 1st Place in the prestigious Harold G. Henderson Award in 1998 from the Haiku Society of America. A collection of his selected haiku, *School's Out*, was published in 1999 by Press Here (Foster City, California). *School's Out*, received 3rd Place in the national Merit Book Awards for the Best Haiku Books published in 1999, an award sponsored by the Haiku Society of America.

For more information about Dr. Brooks see:
<http://faculty.millikin.edu/~rbrooks>