

Activity: Approaching discourse with a spirit of inquiry¹

Goal:

The goal this assignment is to consider some ways that listening to others can go well (and go poorly). Please read the following poem with an eye out for what the poet is trying to tell us about effective communication.

Part One: Introduction to Poetry by Billy Collins²

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Part Two: Answer the following questions by forming small groups and each person briefly shares their answers to both questions before moving to the next person.

1. Consider a conversation that didn't go so well (such as with friends, family, your boss, or your partner). How might the end of the Collins poem explain how things may have gone astray?
2. How might the earlier parts of the poem point the way toward keeping the conversation "on the rails"?

¹ Created by John Draeger. Made available on www.beingthoughtful.net

² Billy Collins, "Introduction to Poetry" from *The Apple that Astonished Paris*. 1988, University of Arkansas Press.