



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2003 Volume III: Teaching Poetry in the Primary and Secondary Schools

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## Music and Poetry

Curriculum Unit 03.03.02  
by Thomas Sullivan

My curriculum unit will be on using music to help learn about poetry and poetry writing. I am a music teacher at Beecher Elementary School where we are focusing as much attention as possible on developing early literacy skills. By using selections from student poetry we will be engaged in modeling good oral/written examples, as well as developing constructive criticism abilities.

I view the pairing of music and poetry as being collaborative between fellow arts, but that has not always been the case. Poetry, in medieval thinking, is oriented toward grammar and rhetoric but music has a mathematics and science origin. There are conceptual as well as historical differences. Poetry and verse are made from words that are representative of reality, whereas the language of music is abstract. But aside from these constructive differences music and verse share many similar ideas- ideas like repetition, rhythm, accent, pulse, meter, sequence and dramatic climax to name some terms common to both arts. I intend to use some of these similar and also contrasting ideas to help students further their ability to write poetry and consequently their writing skills. I hope to use this with my third grade students, but the approach could easily be adopted up and down the entire grade spectrum. The unit will take six to eight weeks of meeting twice a week for a half hour and will culminate in a performance of student work.

Beecher serves a population of about five hundred students. The student body is about 95% African American, the remainder being Hispanic, a few students of Middle Eastern origin and some White children. Each class has a few children with problems; some classes have many kids with issues. For some of our students school may be the most stable environment in which they participate. Many of them have difficult home lives. Some of them are being raised by single parents, relatives and stepparents. Our students display a wide range of academic abilities. This year, our school received a grant to implement a reading program at the kindergarten and first grade levels and this has had positive results. It is in the spirit of intervention that I am developing this unit to utilize musical skills to help students write and perform poetry. I am hopeful that the students will be inspired by learning more about their own poems with a variety of music composition techniques, and that this will reinforce and reward their efforts.

First the students will be encouraged to write poems. Appropriate examples will be read from the existing body of children's literature; nursery rhymes will be used as examples, and themes to write on will be provided if needed. The students will work on their pieces at home and in collaboration with their classroom teachers. Once a core of work emerges I will start using some music ideas to underlie and broaden the students' understanding of their poems.

One commonly used technique will be to have the group learn someone's poem by reciting it from memory. Then the teacher will clap the syllables of the poem while the class recites it. Next you could have part of the class recite the poem and the other part accompany them by clapping the rhythm of the syllables. Then you could recite the poem and clap the syllables in a "round" type fashion, having multiple entries. This kind of tool helps underscore the phonological process of how the syllables are arranged, the prosody that the words make and the recognizable framework that the syllable clapping represents. Now we have a piece of writing that has an accompaniment to it. We could elaborate the music by using hand held drums or shakers. We could stagger entrances of different body part percussion (hand claps, finger snaps, knee slaps) and then we would have a complex multi-level piece, all based on the initial poem.

Another ensemble idea would be to accompany and improvise to a poem. The students could use instruments like a hand held drum, triangle, wood blocks, xylophone and tambourine. The instrumentalists could be instructed to play or 'stand out' when certain characters are developed (as in "Peter and the Wolf", where the horns represent the Wolf and the strings represent Peter). Or the students could underscore the natural pauses, low points and climaxes. All of this would develop sensitivity to the storyline and characters as well as evolve critical listening skills. Some of this should positively influence the student's own writing ability.

Another compositional idea would be drawn from musique concrete. We could accompany the readings with sounds that imitate the written words. For example if the word "wind" or "windy" was used some students could make a whoosh sound to elicit wind. Rain on a roof could be a type of shaker and thunder could be some deep drumming. The students would use their listening skills in looking for opportunities to exploit sounds that imitate actions in the writing. Another way to think of this kind of background is to recall the old radio techniques; a horse trotting might be clip clop sounds from wooden blocks. This collage-like approach may seem modernistic but there is something esthetically pleasing about imitating the sounds that are spoken, and it somehow enhances the student's perception of the written word.

Altogether these three concepts focus on how I will use music techniques to help my students with their poetry and writing skills. After having collected enough poems the class will do some editing and reworking of their pieces. Then we will practice the accompaniment of our work for a few sessions. Finally, we will have a performance at our school where the students and parents can see how we advanced our poetic abilities.

I am part of a team and my unit will be focused on third grade. Jean Sutherland, a third grade teacher, and Gerri Martin, a first grade teacher, are the other team members from Beecher. Jean Sutherland is concurrently developing a third grade unit drawing from the poetry of Shel Silverstein to inspire students to write their own pieces. I intend to use the student's work as they develop it but will use nursery rhymes and work of my own devising to model for the students what the poems can evolve into.

I believe that by using techniques from music my students will acquire a better understanding of writing and reading. I also think that the influence of music on poetry and vice versa will make the learning process more fun, therefore more satisfying. We will not just be making up poems; we will be coming up with a concert to go with them. And as we are making up the music for the concert we will be going over critical ideas like rhythm and pulse and accent. I hope that these opportunities to highlight common ideas about poetry and music will help the students in all their literacy efforts.

## Overall Objectives

- 1) To develop writing skills

- 2) To develop analytic skills
- 3) To discover the connection between rhythm, repetition and prosody in poetry
- 4) To encourage creativity
- 5) To use music compositional techniques to support and expand the meaning of poems
- 6) To inspire in the students a new faith in the power of words

The beginning concept will be to use nursery rhymes to get ideas of what can be done. Nursery rhymes have several advantages as material; familiarity, they are easy to learn, they are rhythmic, and they have some kind of easily grasped message. I will address the fact that we are using nursery rhymes to get us started. I don't want third graders to be resentful of working with material that may seem below them.

The counting rhyme *Bumble Bee* is in a simple meter and would be fun to start with.

Bumble Bee, Bumble Bee,  
Stung a man upon his knee,  
Stung a pig upon his snout,  
Goodness me if you're not out.

The class would then learn the rhyme and repeat it several times. Then I will divide the class into two and we will recite the poem in a round fashion with the second entrance coming at the conclusion of the first line. We will then recite the poem while clapping the syllables. With the class divided in two, the first group will recite the poem and then clap the syllables of the poem while the second group recites the poem, and both will end by clapping the syllables. We could experiment with this rhyme by dividing the class into three or four segments and continue with this kind of imitation form, where the first group recites and then claps and each entrance repeats the process until all are clapping.

We would then have a discussion about the text of the rhyme. I want the students to be aware of the word bumble, and how it sounds like a bumblebee. Onomatopoeia can be defined in High School, but the simple idea that a word can sound like what it represents is a useful concept for writing poetry. The alliteration of

Bumble Bee, Bumble Bee, with the repetitions of those 'b' sounds should also be brought out in discussion. The concept seems to be a useful tool for writing (the words "repetition" and "consonance" are of little if any value at this stage).

The feel of the meter will also be addressed. Bumble Bee, Bumble Bee- short, short, long- short, short, long from the beginning of the rhyme. And then- stung a man upon his knee (short, short, short, short, short, short, long). I don't want to be too technical with the class but I do want them to have a sense of what is making the poem so easy to learn and memorable.

Another treatment of the same rhyme would be to use different body parts for different sound effects. So the first group could recite the poem, then clap the syllables, then slap their thighs to the same rhythm, and finally they could make a buzzing sound to the rhythm. Each successive entrance could follow the same pattern, each one entering after the one before it has said the verse. We could introduce other sound sources. We may tap on our desks, our knees, small drums, wood blocks and so on.

Another rhyme that we could treat in a similar manner is *If I Had A Donkey* .

If I had a donkey  
That wouldn't go,  
Do you think I'd beat him?  
Oh, no, no.  
I'd put him in a barn  
And give him some corn,  
The best little donkey  
That ever was born.

This rhyme is a little more intricate but can be treated and expanded upon in the same manner. First we would learn the rhyme. I think we will learn all the poems as we are working on them by reciting them. As an afterthought I will give out copies of what we have worked on so the students can see what they look like. After we had committed this rhyme to heart then we could work on performing it for ourselves. For this poem I think a stanza of clapping the rhythm might precede the reciting of the poem. The clapping of the rhythm might be done on small drums, or knees, and the round would go for maybe three iterations. We would then discuss the form of the poem: how there is a conjunctive statement, the "If I had."part, and then the clause- "that wouldn't go", and then the question. And then how the rest of the poem answers the question and says what would be done instead.

*Hickory Dickory Dock* is a compound meter example that would be good to work with. Compound meter (6/8

in this case) is where the beat breaks down into three smaller parts: hick-or-ree or 1-2-3, all being one beat.

Hickory, Dickory, Dock.  
The mouse ran up the clock,  
The clock struck one,  
The mouse ran down,  
Hickory, Dickory, Dock.

We would review the rhyme a few times, and then treat it as we have the other rhymes, clapping the syllables and in a round fashion. In this rhyme we have alliteration, a very pronounced rhythm, and the meter of the piece is different from the others we have looked at so far. I will point out how the similar nonsense words follow each other and how the shared rhythm creates continuity. To accompany this we could use the same array of claps, knee slaps, tabletops and small percussive items. I will be looking at this nursery rhyme again in the next section, so the students will be able to differentiate separate performance ideas.

## II

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The next compositional idea would be in the form of accompanying the texts. In the first section we also accompanied the nursery rhymes, but the material with which they played along came from the rhythm of the words. In this case we are using body parts and sounds, pitched and unpitched instruments and sounds from other objects to play along with the text. From this I hope to develop listening and analytical skills that should help the students' writing.

We'll use *Hickory Dickory Dock* again. This time the class will be divided into different parts. At the end of the first line everyone will clap once: Hickory, Dickory, Dock (clap). At the end of the next line selected students will make a squeak sound with a rising inflection: The mouse ran up the clock (squeak). Everyone claps once at the end of the next line: The clock struck one (clap). The same students squeak again but this time with a falling inflection: The mouse ran down (squeak). And everyone claps once at the end of the last line: Hickory, Dickory, Dock (clap).

Another rhyme that would be helpful is *Engine Number 9* .

Engine, Engine, Number Nine,  
Going down Chicago line,  
If the train should jump the track,  
Do I get my money back?

Yes, no, maybe so.

I will split the class into different groups. One group will say "chug-ga, chug-ga" (rest, rest). Another group will say (rest, rest) choo-choo. A third group will say click-ety clack, click-ety clack. The chugga's will start, then the choo choo's will come in followed by the clickety clacks. The final group will recite the rhyme. Alternately, the chugga group could make their sound with a shaker of some type. The clickety clack people could play some kind of wood blocks or claves and the choo-choo might be played on a recorder or flute like instrument.

Then we would discuss the text of the rhyme. The first line has the repetitions of Engine and the number nine, where both paired words start with the same letter. In poetry as well as in music, when we repeat the same word or tone, we have given a different meaning to the repeated subject. The emphasis is on the use of this technique to make a poem, not on the student's ability to identify alliteration or even know what that is. Then I would help the students identify where the rhymes are in the poem.

This mode of accompaniment is like much music making; we have a main part and everything else is somewhat background to it. The parts are still derived from the text but not quite so directly, a little more imaginatively than in the first section. I know that this will help students analytically. I am also hoping that it helps them in their own writing because they will seek to craft poems that not only sound good but also have opportunities to be augmented by other sounds.

### III

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The third method I will use is drawn from *musique concrete*, a French term for compositions that use a collage like technique. We again refer to *Hickory, Dickory, Dock*. Some students would be directed to make a clucking sound with their tongue that would imitate the tick-tock of a clock. We could use a glockenspiel and have an upward glissando occur as the mouse runs up the clock. Then the glissando would go downward for the mouse running down. The tongue clucking would continue throughout.

*Humpty Dumpty* would also suit this treatment.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;  
All the king's horses and all the king's men  
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

A medium sized drum and a low drum could play an alternating steady beat throughout the rhyme. If that was not available a group could be directed to say bom-bum in a low steady voice. When Humpty falls there will be a long downward glissando on the glockenspiel followed by a cymbal crash. The glissando could also be done vocally, starting on a high note and getting lower, then ending by making a big clap. The horses could be imitated by a clip-clop sound made vocally or by wood blocks. The king's men could be evoked by several students marching as that line is read. The last line could be read with no other sounds being made.

Another rhyme to try might be *Rain On The Green Grass* .

Rain on the green grass,  
And rain on the tree;  
Rain on the housetop,  
But not on me.

For this poem we might use a shaker or a rain tree stick to imitate the falling rain on the grass. The shaker could continue and then we would use desktops or claves to symbolize rain on the trees. Those two parts would keep going as we added light drumming on books or a tambourine for the rain on the roof, then silence while the last line is read.

With this sound-montage idea, our imaginations make the boundaries. What do certain actions or things sound like? Once we have decided that something can be imitated or mimicked in a certain way, there is no place for a counter argument. In this way we are using the imagery of the words to help us develop our own associations with them. I believe that this will help the student poets to write more creatively and assertively because they will use inventive ideas in their writing.

## **Additional Rhymes and Combinations**

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An option I may use will be to mix elements of the 'syllable clapping approach' with the accompaniment idea and the montage idea. Indeed, I hope to use all these combinations on the student's work unless one approach or the other is so clearly superior on a given poem as to make the other methods unneeded. *Little Boy Blue* is suitable as a combined performance.

Little Boy Blue,  
come blow your horn,  
The sheep's  
in the meadow,  
The cow's

in the corn.  
Where is the boy  
who looks after the sheep?  
He's under a haycock  
fast asleep.  
Will you wake him?  
No, not I,  
For if I do,  
he's sure to cry.

I would begin this rhyme by having a clapping or drummed introduction. The introduction rhythm would be based on the syllables of the first two lines, beginning with Little Boy Blue, and ending with come blow your horn. Then the recitation of the poem would begin with the clapping (or drumming). The clapping would continue into the next stanza. At the end of the sheep in the meadow line there is a natural pause, here some preassigned students would make a baa- sound. At the close of the cow line in the same slight pause the same students would make a moo- sound. We might use pantomime to imitate the action of the question; where is the boy- we would hold out our hands. We could also gesture sleep, hands folded at the side of our heads and some students could make a snoring noise. At the last stanza I would have the syllable clapping halt and the students who weren't reciting gesture a finger in front of their mouths (to be quiet) and then wiping away make believe tears.

Another example is *Boys and Girls*.

Boys and girls  
come out to play,  
The moon doth shine  
as bright as day.  
Leave your supper  
and leave your sleep,



And join your playfellows  
in the street.  
Come with a whoop,  
and come with a call,  
Come with a good will  
or not at all.  
Up the ladder  
and down the wall,  
A tuppenny loaf  
will serve us all.  
You bring milk  
and I'll bring flour,  
And we'll have a pudding  
in half an hour.

We could start with the clapping introduction with the rhythm from the syllables of the first two lines, and then begin reciting. We could have a vocal glissando in a downward direction on the word leave both times. On the word join we could have a vocal glissando in an upward direction. Some students would make the whoop and call and after the good will line there would be a cued pause to elicit 'not at all'. A glockenspiel glissando would be played upward and then downward for the 'up the ladder' and 'down the wall' lines. We would complete this rhyme with gesturing the mixing of the pudding.

## Lesson Plan Summary

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I will use six to eight weeks of meeting twice a week with the class to cover these materials. That provides me with from twelve to sixteen classes. Some of what will be done relies on the output of the students. If they are really creative I will have to find more time to work with them, and if they are not inspired I will have to spend more time modeling possibilities for them. The culmination will be a performance of student poems and accompaniment.

The basic ideas that I will be using with the class are:

- 1) To become familiar with the poem by reading aloud
- 2) To clap the syllables of the poem while reading it
- 3) To invent 'rounds' with different percussions while reading the poems
- 4) To accompany poems in a homophonic manner
- 5) To accompany poems in a sound effect manner

I believe that by using these ideas from music composition the student's ability to write will be enhanced and improved. I hope that the ways in which we will be exploring poetry will intuitively reinforce what the students already know. I believe that this will help their writing in all forms.

### Lesson 1

Students will learn the poem.

The students will recite poem and clap the syllables while reciting the poem.

This will familiarize students with the structure of certain poems and nursery rhymes.

Students will expand poems by performing rounds with words and syllables.

(By about the fourth lesson I will be using student work in this manner)

### Lesson 2

Students will learn poem.

The students will perform music like background to the poem.

This will highlight a different aspect of poems and nursery rhymes.

Students will expand poem by performing background and recitation.

(By about the fourth lesson I will be using student work in this manner)

### Lesson 3

Students will learn poem.

The students will perform sounds that imitate or emulate sounds in the poem.

This will help the students use good imagery in their own writing.

Students will expand poem by performing background and recitation.

(By about the fourth lesson I will be using student work in this manner)

### Conclusion

I believe that by exposing students to these compositional ideas their poetry writing and, consequently, overall writing abilities will improve. I realize that the techniques might look somewhat simple, but the ideas are demonstrative and meant to show the students part of what makes poetry work. The students will be able to use these concepts in their own writing. By taking the class through these 'poetry performance'

concepts the student's ability to write, analyze and perform will improve.

### Sample Lesson Plan

Materials: "Bumble Bee"- Mother Goose rhyme

Summary: This rhyme has a few manifestations. We are reciting the poem and clapping the syllables as accompaniment. A well-known adaptation is a counting game. The children are put in a circle and the teacher points at a child on the beat in a circular fashion as the poem is recited. When the teacher gets to the 'goodness me if you're not out' part, then that child is out of the game and sits down. At least one version of this rhyme is a song rendition.

Objective: The students will easily learn the rhyme and the clapping or body percussion parts.

Procedures:

- 1) Recite "Bumble Bee" nursery rhyme to class a few times. Cue class to join in recitation. Continue rote practice until the majority of the class has the poem memorized.
- 2) Recite "Bumble Bee" and clap the syllables simultaneously. Have class recite and clap the rhyme.
- 3) Divide class into two groups. The first group will recite the poem once and then clap the syllables once. The second group will do the same but they will start reciting when the first group starts clapping. The groups could be then subdivided into more groups, with other entrance points. The clapping could be replaced by making a buzzing noise instead.
- 4) The class will then discuss how we took this rhyme and made a bigger piece out of it. Questions could be; how did we make the rhyme longer? Where do we clap or buzz?
- 5) The students will be encouraged to write their own poems so that we can try this experiment

on their pieces.

### Sample Lesson Plan

Materials: "Hickory Dickory Dock"- Mother Goose rhyme

Summary: The children will accompany the rhyme by making noises and vocal inflections.

Objective: The students will gain critical thinking skills to enhance their understanding of this rhyme and their own poems. This concept will be contrasted with the first lesson in which the accompaniment was the syllable pattern.

Procedures:

- 1) Recite "Hickory Dickory Dock" to class. Continue rote practice until the majority of the group has it memorized.
- 2) The class will recite the rhyme. Have the group clap once at the end of the first line. Assign a few students to make a squeaking noise with a rising inflection at the end of the second line (the mouse running up the clock). Have the class clap once at the end of the third line. The previously assigned students will make the squeaking noise with a downward inflection at the end of the fourth line. Everyone claps once at the last line.
- 3) Have the students switch parts and perform the rhyme again.
- 4) Ask for suggestions of what other sounds we could make instead of claps and squeaks; knee slaps, drum rolls, guitar glissandos?
- 5) The students will be encouraged to write their own poems so that we can try this technique on their work.

## Sample Lesson Plan

Material: "Rain On the Green Grass"- Mother Goose Rhyme

Summary: The students will accompany the rhyme with sounds that imitate the actions of the poem (falling rain sounds).

Objective: The students will develop critical listening and thinking skills by coming up with ideas of what certain things sound like.

Procedures:

- 1) Recite the poem with class. Continue reciting until most of them have it memorized.
- 2) Assign a group of students to make rain noises while the rest of the class recites. They could drop beans onto a carpet to elicit rain on the grass, they could use a shaker to imitate rain on a tree, and they could drop beans onto a tin plate or tambourine for rain on the roof.
- 3) Have a discussion about what others ways they could imitate the action of the poem. Experiment with the student's ideas.
- 4) Encourage the students to complete their own poems so that this idea could be used for performance.

## The Arts Curriculum Framework

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The above activities will meet various goals as set out by the State in 1998.

K-12 Performance Standard

- sing in groups, blending vocal timbres;
- perform in groups, blending instrumental timbres, matching dynamic levels;
- improvise short songs and instrumental pieces, using a variety of sound sources;
- create and arrange music to accompany readings or dramatizations;
- create and arrange short songs and instrumental pieces within specified guidelines;
- use a variety of sound sources when composing;
- demonstrate perceptual skills...by answering questions about, and describing aural examples of

music of various styles;

- explain, using appropriate terminology, their personal preferences for specific musical works and styles;

- identify similarities and differences in the meanings of common terms used in the various arts; and

- identify ways in which the principles and subject matter of music and other disciplines taught in school are interrelated.

Source: The Arts Curriculum Framework

Connecticut State Department of Education

Division of teaching and Learning

March 1998

Content Standards for Music

May, 1999

The above activities will satisfy the following grade three content standards:

Content Standard 1.0 Singing.

Students will:

- Sing with feeling and expression in solo, unison, rounds, and part singing
- Respond to cues of a conductor relating to dynamics, blending, phrasing, and interpretation
- Echo more complex melodic and rhythmic patterns, using words of songs and syllables

Content Standard 2.0 Playing Instruments

Students will:

- Play instruments while other students sing or play contrasting parts.

Content Standard 3.0 Improvise melodies, variations and accompaniments

Students will:

- Select appropriate instruments to compliment music of various cultures
- Improvise within various styles
- Use texts as basis for exploration on pitched and unpitched instruments, traditional and non-traditional sounds
- Improvise a variety of rhythmic accompaniments

Content Standard 4.0 Composing and arranging music

Students will:

- Record their musical ideas in non-standard or standard notations
- Compose music using known rhythmic and/or melodic patterns
- Create introductions, interludes, and codas for songs and instrumental pieces

Content Standard 5.0 Reading and notating music

Students will:

- Take simple rhythmic and melodic dictation using known elements

Content Standard 6.0 Listening to, analyzing and describing music

Students will:

- Perform, create, and listen to rondo form

- Distinguish between simple and complex rhythm patterns
- Listen to and identify simple forms
- Be aware of differences in tone color
- Distinguish between families of instruments
- Be aware of mood and tempo in when listening to music
- Be aware of instruments from various cultures
- Recognize changes in dynamics

#### Content Standard 7.0 Evaluating music and music performance

Students will:

- Be able to evaluate their performance according to an evaluation list
- Identify, in their own performance accuracy or inaccuracy using musical terms
- Improve ability to evaluate music using musical terminology

#### Content Standard 8.0 Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts

Students will:

- Respond to programmatic music through writing activities
- Begin to understand the creative process in music by relating it to other disciplines
- Learn appropriate performance behaviors

#### Content Standard 9.0 Understanding music in relation to history and culture

Students will:



- Associate various musical styles with corresponding social functions, historical period, and cultural context

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