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Play-based Poetry: An Exploration of Creativity and Digital Media

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Introduction

Technology is something that exists all around us and has infiltrated our lives in many ways, especially in the realm of education. The challenge for many educators today, is how to use technology in a way that enhances learning in their classrooms. Luckily for me, my first grade students are too young to have cell phones, smart watches, or tablets that can distract them during the school-day. They do not have Facebook pages, Instagram accounts, or Snapchat. Many of them use their parents' devices to access social media platforms and play games. However, since these devices are not their own they do not come to school or take time away from our learning environment.

The fact that my students do not have their own devices in school made me want to use technology in my classroom even more. I saw it as an opportunity to explore technology positively with my students. Going into a seminar on Digital Lives I really wanted to be particular about what I wanted to focus my research on. These days there are online resources for almost every single school subject with many curricular resources for each. This was very exciting and made me think about the seemingly endless possibilities for my classroom. I knew that I needed to narrow down my ideas and pick something I could really dive into and explore that would be in the best interest of my students.

Something that came up a lot during our seminar discussions and readings is that an increase of using digital technology is associated with a decrease in creativity. There is much discussion that creativity is bred out of boredom and that people do not find themselves as bored as they used to be. This is partially due to the fact that people are spending more time online. There is always something to see, or do, or someone to talk to so that people are no longer really alone with their thoughts. There is also the case that when people find that they are bored they fill their time with looking at screens instead of engaging their minds in creative ways. I have seen that my own students are not as creative as you would expect six-year old students to be. Even though the technology is not making its way into my classroom, I still see the repercussions of it. When my students are writing they struggle to express themselves, their words are similar to mine or what we have created together during a mini lesson. A goal of mine has been to help my young students discover their creativity and authentic voices in our writing block. I began to think about using the digital media platforms that they were familiar with and honestly in some way to blame for their lack of creativity to help them become more creative. This felt like a risk, but I was excited about the possibilities that this would bring my

students. I wanted my students to discover that there are more facets to technology than just games, Snapchat and YouTube.

After careful consideration of my students' needs, I decided I wanted to explore digital poetry. Poetry is not something that I normally spend that much time on with my young students. However, I felt that spending more time on poetry would greatly enhance a variety of our literacy lessons such as fluency, expression, and adding details to written work. I felt that looking at digital poems would be a way that I could incorporate poetry and technology into my classroom.

While I was excited to begin my research on digital poetry, I knew that I would need to be cautious about how I incorporated the technology in my classroom. My students are extremely tech-savvy and I sometimes worry that my very young students can be exposed to dangerous situations online. For this reason, I wanted to incorporate a part of my curriculum that would focus on internet safety. We already focus on stranger danger as part of our health curriculum and I felt as though online stranger safety would greatly benefit them. This would bring an "outdated" health curriculum that only focused on strangers in the "real world" into the twenty-first century.

I decided that my students would explore poetry online and discuss the craft moves that the poets used in their works. This is similar to what we already do with books during our literacy block so this would digitize a familiar concept. After studying the virtual texts, my students would get the opportunity to be the poets themselves. My students would create their own digital pieces that we would eventually "post" online. Since I teach young children, we would discuss how we could share these digital poems in a way that is safe. My hope is that this process would teach my students about appropriate ways to post things and that while that the internet can be dangerous there are ways to share ideas safely. Due to my students' young age their work would only be posted online with a parent waiver and media release signed.

Rationale

When my students and I look at the literature we read in class we always look at whom the authors, illustrators, and publishers are. During writing, we have "Publishing Days" where students edit and rewrite their "works in progress" as neatly as possible as a "published work". Most of their work is handwritten except for a few times in the year when my students try to type their "published work" in the computer lab. A cover page, dedication, and "about the author" section is often included as part of a "published piece". These are components of books that makes this activity more authentic for my students. Some students do notice that there is a big difference between our "books" and the books that we read. This brings up discussions about editors and publishers. My students are likely to notice that there is a big difference between works that have been published through a publishing house and works that are just posted online.

Digital media has changed how authorship and publishing work. Anyone can post anything online which can have both positive and negative effects. The digital age can open the door for students to take advantage of acting as an author and publisher. "There are many new technologies people use to create something that makes them authors."¹ Digital technology gives people the opportunity to create works that they would not have the ability to create without it. There are many forms of digital art that can change the way the viewers interact with the art. Since this art is so interactive it feels completely different from what it was before it was

digitized. Students can learn to create these experiences through resources online. Some young people are already taking videos or creating art and raps to share online. Students are tech-savvy and know of these things; as a teacher I want to help my students to learn to use them in a safe way and to create something truly thought provoking.

“Many students have never experienced what it feels like to be an author.”² My students have a Writer’s Workshop block during the day which is highly structured. They get used to the routine and completing a written work becomes less exciting as the year goes on. Many students would be thrilled at the idea of writing something as an author and then acting as a publisher to post it online. This type of activity would engage them in a way that they may not be during a regular writing block.

An activity that would give students instant gratification would be posting something online as opposed to writing through the workshop process. This can help students learn the difference between what a publishing house does and what it means to personally post something online. Even though there is no publishing house involved in Writer’s Workshop, students must go through several phases before they can edit their work. The first phase is called “pre-writing” where students jot ideas on a graphic organizer. This is followed by a first draft which is revised and edited. Then the writing is evaluated and can be published. Students are expected to write for prolonged periods of time and think critically about their work, so they can “publish” the best version possible. This process is similar to the role that a publisher traditionally played in the era of print. It greatly differs from how things can be instantly posted by anyone online in our new digital age. For example, traditionally “A publisher was a company with employees who oversaw the transformation of a book from a manuscript to a printed volume that could be mass-produced. The publisher had editors, artists, typesetters, printers, and binders to accomplish this task.”³ If you are personally posting something by yourself online you have much more creative freedom than publishing through a publishing house. Instead of having all the different employees from a publishing house working on your piece, it is just you with total creative freedom over it. When you post something independently you are the person who decides what gets posted and how it gets posted. This type of freedom is very important for my students. They often worry about what others think and how they will get judged. Beyond learning about the role of authors and publishers, this project would focus on my students and what they want to express. This would help them find their creativity, authentic voice, and self-expression.

The Importance of Poetry in Early Literacy

There is much research to support the importance of poetry in early literacy. A study conducted by Huffington Post reported that “Poetry can help with language development, creative language skills, writing skills, self-expression, and the development of natural rhythm.”⁴ When I thought about how many benefits there were to using poetry in my classroom I knew that I needed to utilize it more often. I decided to further explore the importance of all of these skills to determine how they would benefit my students.

Language Development

“All children need opportunities to develop their oral language throughout the primary grades. Speaking up in front of an audience, participating in a group oral presentation, and mastering the pronunciation of progressively more challenging vocabulary are important skills for every linguistic and cultural background.”⁵

Research has shown that developing strong oral language skills is critically important in the lower grades but should still be a focus in the upper elementary grades. Poetry is an amazing resource for teachers to use to help cultivate these skills.

The National Institute of Deafness and Communication Disorders states that language development skills “develop best in a world that is rich in sounds, sights, and consistent exposure to the speech and language of others.”⁶ While language development typically occurs during the first three years it is important to keep an environment rich in sounds, sights, speech, and language throughout the primary grades. It is also important to think about the fact that not every child attends preschool. Therefore, these students who did not attend preschool may have had less access to speech and language development than their peers who did attend preschool.

There have been studies which research how preschool students perform in their language development after participating in different literacy based activities. Students who are often read to and engaging vocabulary score higher than their peers who did not get this language exposure. One study focused on interactive book reading and the results were as followed:

“Teachers read books to children and reinforced the vocabulary in the books by presenting concrete objects that represented the words and by providing children with multiple opportunities to use the book-related words... This provided children with opportunities to use language and learn vocabulary in a meaningful context. Children who were in the interactive book reading intervention group scored significantly better than children in the comparison group on Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-III and other measures of receptive and expressive language.”⁷

The activities used in this study can be used in the same way with poetry instead of books in the primary grades. I would read poetry with my students and then reinforce the vocabulary used in the poem. I would then discuss the poem using open-ended questions. This would allow my students opportunities to use the vocabulary from each poem. These types of activities will promote further development of oral language skills for all students. Any easy way to digitize these activities is to use an online poetry library to access the poems. Many of these websites have poems divided by category so it would be easy to focus on specific content area vocabulary. Furthermore, the internet can be used to look up words that students do not understand. They can use online dictionaries, encyclopedias, videos, or other websites to further develop the meaning behind certain words. Students would learn how to use the internet as a tool in language development.

Creative Language Skills

We are experiencing an epidemic of children who are no longer as creative as they have been in the past. Therefore, many educators are experiencing a lack of creativity in their classrooms. Educators are producing creative language resources at a rapid pace to combat this area of concern. However, these teachers created resources may not be needed as much as art needs to be implemented back into the classroom. “Perhaps the most straightforward form of creativity is art, which can include stories, plays, music, poems, mime and dance. These activities diversify coursework, require extremely proactive participation and establish a positive classroom environment.”⁸ Poems are just one art form that can easily breed creativity within the classroom. Beyond this, many other art forms can be accessed digitally by young students. Experiencing the arts can help them to hone in on the creative language skills that they are lacking. Poetry frames and generators exist

online and can lend a hand to students who are struggling to fill in the blanks in their poetry. Using this type of digital source can show students how they can use technology to feel creative. It will also further support the development of their creative language skills.

Writing Skills

The writing skills that students are expected to meet by the end of each year are clearly laid out in the Common Core Standards. Most of the Writing Standards are aimed at non-fiction texts and the specific criteria for this type of text. Writing poetry can easily fall under Language or Speaking and Listening standards but may not correlate directly to the Writing Standards. For this reason, I would implement poetry into my literacy block and not my writing block. Poetry can help students distinguish between uppercase and lowercase letters, as well as determining the meaning of adjectives within the poems. Beyond this, poems can also take place in the past, present, or future. This can help students identify which tense they are using. Reading and listening to poetry can expose students to many of these language standards.

In turn, they will reach a higher level of Bloom's Taxonomy when they apply these skills and write their own poems. The highest level of Bloom's Taxonomy is the tier of creation. Verbs that are commonly used to describe activities that focus on this level are design, author, investigate, construct, and assemble. Constructing or designing a poem would allow students to reach this level of Bloom's Taxonomy. This would ensure that they were engaged in rigorous and meaningful work. Even though poetry is not a genre of writing that is expected of students in first grade, the benefits of students writing their own poetry persuade me that it is necessary for them to engage in this kind of text.

Unfortunately, lower elementary teachers are often trying to prepare their students for higher order thinking skills and standardized testing that will occur in later grades. And while I do not prescribe to "teaching to the test" I do want my students to be as prepared as possible when it is their turn to take these tests. Teaching them how to understand and analyze poetry regardless of its form and then write their own poems will provide them with so much valuable practice in language and writing skills. Students can also type their poems since typing is an aspect of standardized testing. Some students only have access to phones or tablets, this hinders their ability to type on a keyboard. Being able to practice their typing skills in first grade would help them to be more successful later in their school years.

Self-Expression

Self-Expression is defined as the expression of one's feelings, thoughts, or ideas, especially in writing, art, music, or dance. Self-expression can be challenging for young students who are still not sure who they are. A problem many young people face today is creating their "online persona". Your online persona is how you present yourself online but it may not always be a true representation of who you really are. Writing can be extremely personal and allow students to explore all facets of themselves. They may develop a better sense of who they are through writing. "With every post, every tweet, and every share, your digital native is creating a persona, even as she is experimenting with her identity. It's a virtual high-wire act, and she's bound to have some missteps."⁹ Every time you post something, it gets added to the collection that will eventually make up your online persona. I want my students to feel as though they could truly express themselves and be who they are, but I will need to make sure it is not anything that could come back and harm them later on in life. This is a fine line to walk since I do want my students to take ownership of their poetry. However, I must also ensure that they do not create anything they would eventually regret. I would have to be sure that my students feel secure in their self-expression when they give me their finished product. Through our final

project of sharing work digitally students will get to experience how self-expression relates to technology.

Development of Natural Rhythm

Natural Rhythm while reading is strongly connected to fluency. Most definitions of reading fluency include three observable and measurable components: accuracy, rate, and expression (sometimes referred to as prosody).¹⁰

Accuracy

Scholastic defines accuracy as the ability to read words without making mistakes.¹¹ Young students often struggle with accuracy since they are still learning phonics and determining what letters and sounds make up words. Poetry can help them learn these phonemic chunks through rhyme. This will help them read more fluently while in text. Fluency is a large goal in first grade. In Connecticut the standard created by the state is that by the end of first grade students will be able to read 32 words accurately in one minute. This is slightly faster than 2 words a second. Becoming familiar with rhyming patterns through poetry may help more students reach this goal.

Some websites which read aloud to students highlight the word which is being read. If students are following along with the digital text, they will see the word light up as it is read. This helps students become more accurate when reading as they have been exposed to the word more frequently.

Rate

Rate is defined by Scholastic is how quickly a student is able to read.¹² If students are struggling to decode the sounds in words, then they will have a slower reading rate. Poetry can be read repetitively which helps the students to read more quickly as they become more familiar with the text. Poems can also offer an awareness and pleasure for sounds. This can be explicitly taught to students as poems are seen as more playful than books. This is largely due to rhyming patterns. These rhyming patterns can show students that words with similar sounds and structures have similar pronunciation. Reading poems will also give them more time in text in general which will positively influence their rate as well. Hearing the poems read aloud through a digital platform may help students to hear how the words should sound. Then when the students read it, they will be practicing at the appropriate rate. Rate is also necessary for students to reach the end of year goal of 32 words in one minute.

Expression

Lastly, expression “refers to the ability to change your voice to show feeling when reading.”¹³ Expression is the part of natural rhythm which my young students struggle with the most. This is something that develops over time as students get better at understanding what they are reading. Poetry lends itself nicely to expression since most poems are expressive. Students can learn that there are feelings in poems and figure out how to express these feelings while reading them. This practice will help them to be expressive when reading other genres as well. The natural rhythm in poetry can also help students identify the expression of the poem. When reading a poem students are able to feel the shift in feelings this guides them to express the changes appropriate when reading it orally. Finally, when my students craft their own poems, they will read them with the expression that they desire to convey. Some students still struggle to identify how they are feeling in first grade. Having an outlet to express these feelings may give students a chance to understand themselves and their feelings more. Many digital resources for online poetry include having them read aloud

or performed, using these sources could help students to understand the emotion and expression within these poems.

Types of Poetry

After extensively researching the benefits of using poetry with young students, I needed to think about what types of poems I wanted to implement in my classroom. I wanted to be extremely mindful about which types of poems I would use and how they could help my students. Research suggests that when many teachers first introduce students to poetry they mainly focus on acrostic poems. “An acrostic is a poem in which the first letter of each line spells out a word”¹⁴ For example:

Pretty

Outstanding

Educational

Message

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has digital lesson plans for acrostic poems directed at the primary grades. The overview of the lessons they suggest is as follows: “Students write free-verse acrostic poems about themselves using the letters of their names to begin each line. They then write an additional acrostic poem about something that is important to them.”¹⁵ While some word choice is involved in this type of poetry it can be basic and not very creative. However, it would be easy for students to create this type of poem digitally since they could just type the letters down and the words across in an online document. While it would be easy to do, it might not be that exciting for students after a while. Research suggests that other types of poems must be taught in order for students to truly benefit from a poetry unit. From my own experience that I am not super passionate about acrostic style poems, I researched further to find what would really engage myself and my students.

There many types of poetry beyond acrostic for children to interact with. In addition to that, there are many online resources which can help children read poetry and write their own poems. Some other genres that the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) suggests for the lower grades are found poetry, theme poetry focusing on the five senses, thematic poetry focusing on content areas, and Rebus poetry.

Found Poetry

“Found poetry is created by using only words and phrases that have been selected and rearranged from another text.”¹⁶ In this type of poetry students search a document for words they enjoy and then use these words to create something new. Taking something and then creating something new helps students to achieve the highest level of Bloom’s Taxonomy; studies show that students retain and learn most when they are engaging at this level. The structure is new and the ideas from the original document have been repurposed.

A variation of found poetry is “blackout poetry”. It is called blackout poetry because the poet will black out the

words that they do not want to use on the document that they are working from. What is left are the words that they have left uncovered to create a new poem. Furthermore, this kind of poetry can also be used to create works of art with the words. By blacking out the proper words in the text an image can be formed with the words that have been blacked out and the ones that remain. Using found poetry can also provide students with choice in the activity which is critically important at all ages. It is also important to remember that these poems do not need to make perfect sense. Rather, students should enjoy engaging in the process and learning a new art form (digital or concrete).

Found poetry is a great way for students to explore literacy as well as become more creative and it can be done digitally. If students begin with an online text, they can mark it up with an editing or paint style app. They can completely create this type of poem digitally if they type it. In order for the benefits of literacy to be apparent they will need to be able to read the words to use them in their new poems. For this reason, found poetry will help with accuracy while reading. The students must also be creative when deciding which words they would like to remove and which words they want to restructure in their own poem. There are many digital examples of found poetry that students can look at online for inspiration. It is a fun and creative way for students to explore digital media, poetry, and their own self-expression.

Poetry of the Senses

The five senses are often taught in the low grades as part of science or used in writing. We learn about the world around us through our senses. Students explore how their senses help them learn and understand different things. After being taught initially, the senses are often incorporated in writing units since they help students to use adjectives. Using sense poetry would create cross curricular activities with science, reading, and writing. "Your five senses help you take in information from the world around you. These senses are also a powerful tool to use when you're writing. They help convey a message to readers by providing a strong image in their heads."¹⁷ Students can learn how to use imagery (which is a craft move) by including sensory words in their poems. One idea for sense poetry is to describe certain foods by using the senses. For example, if they were writing a poem about popcorn students could describe how it sounds when it is popping and how it smells at the movie theaters or if it is too burnt. While writing these types of poems technology can be used for students to watch videos of popcorn popping so they get the imagery and hear the sounds. This can be done with any experience the student may wish to write about. Technology can be used to help remind them of what something looks and sounds like.

Content Area Poems

In content area, poetry students look at texts that are related to a specific subject such as a scientific or social studies topic. They can create different types of poems based off the words that they find in these texts.

One example is to create acrostic poetry with these subject area vocabulary words. This would make the acrostic poems more meaningful than just using a name or word and adding adjectives to it. For example, students will "gather a word bank of supporting details and content vocabulary about a concept. Then they use these words as a basis for writing acrostic poems"¹⁸ These poems that they create can help them to further understand the concepts that they are being taught in these content areas. They will reach a higher level of Bloom's Taxonomy if they take what they have learned and create something new with the information. This would create opportunities for cross-curricular activities that would benefit students. My students would be working with literature and that content subject. Students could also create blackout poetry for these content area poems. The main idea is to get students to interact with the vocabulary in a new way

that will help them to create a deeper meaning.

Technology could be used to create these types of poems as well. The acrostic style poems as previously mentioned can be typed in an online format. Students can also use word generators to get ideas for their word banks in a specific content. They can also utilize online poem libraries and search by category or content to glean ideas for their own poems.

Rebus Poetry

Rebus means that images are used in place of words in a text. This imagery is often used in lower level texts to help students to understand what words are being used. A common teaching strategy in primary grades is using the illustrations in a text to help aid with decoding and comprehension. In Rebus poetry icons are used in place of certain words such as a heart to symbolize love or a smiley face to signify happiness. This type of poetry can be a great option for young students who cannot write full words by themselves yet. They can use images and icons to express themselves without being worried about getting the words right. Often young students get fixated on spelling and reading everything correctly. However, Rebus poetry can give them an outlet to express themselves without using words.

An extremely easy way to tie Rebus poetry back to technology is to let students use emojis as their icons. Students are very familiar with using emojis to express themselves when using their phones and tablets. They could have fun using emojis to create a poem instead of using them for texting or posting on social media. Students may have an easier time using emojis rather than other icons that they may be unfamiliar with. Even if they did not use emojis, students could use Clip Art in a word document and insert the images directly into the document.

There are so many poems beyond the ones listed on the NCTE's website that can also be used to help students understand what poetry is and how they can use it to express themselves. There are many other digital resources that teachers and students can use to create their own poems. Such resources are poem generators or word generators that assist in the creation of poetry. Students should have the chance to interact with these interfaces so that they have a full grasp of what poetry is and what types of poems are available for them to create. There are way more options beyond acrostic style poems that students should access to explore themselves.

Creativity and Poetry

In order for my students to feel inspired to create experiences that would lead to poetry, I needed them to unplug from devices. Part of the creative process is trying new things. My students will need to be open about trying things that they might find unconventional because they are so used to interacting with technology. I am hoping to force them outside of their comfort zones (safely) so that they have new things to write about.

Play

There are many ways for children to access their creativity. However, they are often more focused on technology than exploring the world around them. When many of my students think of "playing" they immediately think of video games. I was thinking about play in the more traditional sense. I researched play-

based ideas like role-playing, sensory play, and blackout poetry as inspiration for them. I wanted to explore options that my students are not often given in our highly structured school-day.

“The No Child Left Behind movement seemed to discount the importance of play-based learning in favor of more explicit instruction and testing in the lower grades.”¹⁹ Many times in the lower elementary grades there is a strong focus on testing. Students are expected to be engaged in higher order thinking problems throughout most of the day. In spite of this, it does not mean that students cannot experience play activities and use these experiences to complete rigorous tasks.

“Kathryn Hirsh-Pasek, a well-known child development expert in the Department of Psychology at Temple University and a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, argues that humans learn best when at least one of these four pillars are present: 1. Individuals take an active role in the learning environment. 2. They are engaged. 3. Information is meaningful. 4. Learners interact in a social context.”²⁰

All the play based activities that I would use to explore poetry would include these pillars of learning to ensure that these activities would be more than just traditional “play”. The benefits of these activities would be both social and academic as my students explored new ways to express themselves through play.

Role-Play

Merriam Webster defines role-play as “to act the role of” or “to represent in action”. When children use their imaginations to play or pretend, they are role-playing. Due to the influx of technology, YouTube, and Fortnite as well as highly structured time in school young people do not play in this way as often as they used to. Role-playing is a wonderful way for students to create opportunities that they have missed from being so “plugged” in to technology. They can take the experiences they make and write poems about the role-playing they engaged in. Or instead, they can act out the poems that they have written using their bodies charades style as the role-play. This kinesthetic process would engage more learners than just students who are visual or auditory learners. Susan Griss argues that:

“When educators consciously integrate the arts and education, the benefits are magnified. Kinesthetic learning has wide-ranging applications, such as interpreting a concept through physical means to increase comprehension, exploring literature themes and feelings through creative movement, exploring the universality and particularity of human culture through dance, and channeling disruptive energy into creative paths that eventually improve mental concentration.”²¹

Learning through moving can increase comprehension and improve our cognitive functions. When we engage in activities that cross the midline of our bodies, such as role-playing, we are creating more synapses in our brains. This increase helps information flow from one side of the brain to the other at a faster rate. Beyond allowing students to act creatively and explore themselves, their brains benefit as well. I researched role-playing extensively to ensure that my students could explore this activity in a way that would help them create or present their poems. In order to bring this into the digital era I would have students watch movement videos to inspire them to move their bodies. Or, to have them take videos of each other acting out

their role-play poems, so they could watch them and use them at a later date.

Cooperation Activities

A challenge that this generation of students face is that they do not interact with their peers in the same way that past generations have. Due to the influx of technology in their lives, kids can interact with one another instantly through texts, videos, and apps. However, they are losing out on valuable time together face to face. “Kids seek out places to be with their peers away from the watchful eyes of adults. Now, social media and online games are prime gathering places.”²² Young people have always sought a place where they can interact without adults’, now they have many places where they can interact with each other without adult supervision.

While students are engaging more often with their peers, they are doing so in private where adults are not around to mediate their behaviors. This creates a host of issues that could be avoided if they were interacting in person. “Previous generations likely had greater independent range and more unstructured time than our kids have today. That affected how involved our friendships were, and how we worked out conflicts and power struggles.”²³ Technology does not have expression or tone, this means that many things can be taken out of context and misinterpreted. It is critically important for students to form relationships in real life and learn how to deal with conflicts. But they should also be aware that there are cordial ways to act online.

I researched collaboration activities that involved writing and technology. “Digital poetry calls out for shared authorship, but also for shared (negotiated) interpretation: open work becomes open source, reader becomes author.”²⁴ Using technology to create poetry online not only can include more authors but more viewpoints as it is being created. Many times, when new works of literature are being drafted digitally multiple people interact on the same document online. These people may never see each other face to face but they are interacting with one another through technology. They must collaborate entirely online without creating conflicts with one another that would halt their productivity. Some platforms allow for teachers to view student productivity online, this adds accountability to the work. “These platforms (MediaWiki and Google Docs) gave teachers the facility to closely monitor student progress, and to provide feedback to assist in the effective management of the report-writing process.”²⁵ Beyond ensuring that all students were collaborating fairly, teachers could also provide instant feedback without being handed a paper, writing comments, and returning the paper. This can speed up the writing and editing process.

“To get started with Google Docs, users must first create an account and then a document. They can then invite others to collaborate, assigning rights to update or edit the document. Changes to a document are automatically uploaded and saved to the server.”²⁶ There are many different platforms that can be used for collaborative digital writing. One platform that many teachers are already using is Google Docs; Google Classroom could easily support this activity. I would have students either work together in pairs to create a poem. Or I would bring it one step further and collaborate with other students in the building, district, or even other states (with parental consent). Technology allows for kids to interact with people, so it makes sense to show them how to engage with others in a productive and appropriate way.

Technology allows multiple authors to work on the same piece without being in the same place. This is not an opportunity that would exist if we did not have the technology that we do today. It allows access to people who might not have had the opportunity to create with other authors before. Beyond this, an activity such as this can help students develop the cooperation skills that they are lacking from interacting primarily online. It seems contradictory that they would use digital media to help develop a skill that using technology has

stopped from naturally occurring. However, this can show children that people can work together online in an appropriate and productive way. This is a skill that they will be able to transfer when they eventually become part of the workforce.

Poetry and Technology

My students are a generation of producers, I knew this curriculum would engage them as such. They have grown up surrounded by technology; they know how to use and create with it. My interest was to help them create poems, art, or experiences that they would be proud to post online. I aspired to help my students discover an online “persona” that they would be proud of when they got older. I decided to embrace their status as “producers” and jump into them creating and posting safely.

Jaron Lanier ends his thought-provoking preface to his book “You Are Not a Gadget” by saying, “You have to be somebody before you share yourself.”²⁷ Young students love to share small details about themselves when given opportunities to talk. This made me wonder: if my students had social media accounts would they be authentic or personas? I would guide my students to create a poem or other type of digital media that would reflect their authentic self. While being authentic may seem challenging to adults, it is extremely natural for young students to behave this way as they have not been influenced by outer forces yet. For the most part first graders do not behave differently to “fit in” in a certain way.

My students come to my classroom already knowing how to post something online, but they do not fully understand everything that this simple task entails. “A study revealed that kids who are mentored by their parents get into less trouble in their digital world.”²⁸ This confirms that while students are aware of how to explore the digital world, they do need guidance to do so in an appropriate way. I wanted to address digital safety in reference to strangers, age restrictions on social media websites, and obtaining parental consent.

Digital Safety

“Our kids have a digital reputation... we want to cement in their minds an understanding that what they create is associated with them. We don’t want there to be a huge fear factor attached to this idea- we simply need to encourage kids who participate in social spaces to produce positive content, always.”²⁹ While it is inevitable that young people are going to post online, it is possible to steer them in a direction of positivity. It is also important to encourage them to post for themselves and not for others. They do not need validation through “likes”. Many young people are developing problems with their own self image as they get into upper elementary and middle school. A lot of this stems from wanting to be accepted, popular, and well “liked” online. Depending on the platform they are using, they may not even know the people who they are seeking validation from. This is unsafe.

On social media people can interact with two groups of people; people they know and people they do not know. Both groups of people can pose a threat to the safety of children on the internet. “35 % of third, fourth and fifth graders had their own cell phone, 11.4% responded that they had received mean or hurtful email or text messages about them.”³⁰ When young people interact with each other digitally they may engage in cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is when technology is used to bully someone else online, many times more than two young people are involved in this type of behavior. Using technology to harm someone else is not

something I want to encourage in my classroom. For this reason, my curriculum has a strong emphasis on positivity and collaborating with others. If students behave this way online from a young age, they may be less likely to engage in cyberbullying as they get older.

The other group of people who students may interact with online are strangers which can also threaten their safety. A study that focused on teens revealed that “32% of online teens have been contacted online by a complete stranger. Of teens who have been contacted, 23% say they were scared or uncomfortable by the stranger contact. Overall, 7% of online teens experienced disturbing stranger contact.”³¹ While this study was focused on teens it is still alarming to see that this many young people have been contacted by a complete stranger. It is important for children to know that strangers pose a threat online as well as in person. “65% just ignored it or deleted it. 21% responded so they could find out more about the person. 8% responded and asked to be left alone. 3% told an adult or someone in authority.”³² Out of the 32% of teens who were contacted only 3% of them told an adult about it. This is something that I would address with my students and let them know from a young age that if they are contacted by a stranger online, they need to tell an adult. I would also reiterate what we learn in our standard health curriculum that we do not talk to strangers. First graders do take stranger danger seriously, however, they do not think online strangers are as much of a threat. The reason for this is that they cannot physically see the stranger which makes them appear less threatening. It will be important to tell students that no matter online or in person strangers are not safe to talk to.

Age Restrictions

Many websites such as YouTube, Facebook, and other social media sites have age restrictions. While my students feel as though this is unfair it is really in their best interest and helps to keep them safe. “The minimum age to open an account on most social media sites is 13... Some others still allow children at the age of 13 to sign up but with their parent's permission. Despite these clearly stated and published age restrictions, there are a large and growing number of children under 13 that use social media networks... without their parent's knowledge and consent.”³³ Despite the age restrictions on social media sites or even video games, young people still find their way to them with or without parent knowledge. The reason that this is dangerous is because students do not know who is viewing their profiles or who they might be playing a game with online. This is directly related to being contacted by strangers online. Young kids are impressionable and can find themselves interacting with people whom do not have their best interest in mind. In general, it is not safe to be interacting with people whom they do not know and they need to treat people who they meet online the same way that would treat a stranger in public; with caution and look for guidance from their parent guardian.

This led me to re-think about what I wanted my end of unit activity to be. Initially, I wanted to post my students' work online. I potentially even wanted to attempt this on a digital platform. The more I researched the more I realized that I did not want to do this. I felt super hypocritical telling my students that they were too young to use social media and then desiring to post their work online anyway. This led me to explore other options for my students to share their work with each other and a broader audience. I decided that I would take pictures or scans of my students' work. From here I would create a slideshow from these pictures and scans. We would share this slideshow at our end of unit poetry slam. This would protect the integrity of my students and keep me from feeling hypocritical.

Parental Consent

Based on my goals for this unit I would eventually be digitizing my students' poems. Even though I would not

be posting their poems online, I wanted to ensure the safety of my students and their ideas. In order to post photos of students online a media release must be signed by a parent or guardian. I would repeat this process before posting the students' poems as well. This would reiterate to my students that they are still too young to be posting things online without their parents knowing. I eventually decided to host a poetry slam at the end of the unit. At this event I would project their works onto a screen through a projector, instead of posting my students' work on the internet. Sharing this way would make it much more contained and shared on a much smaller scale. This would show my students that they are not old enough, even with parental consent, to post on social media just yet. They would learn instead that there are other ways to share themselves with the people who care about them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, after extensive research I learned that technology, if used appropriately, can have positive effects for younger students. I realized they need to be taught alternatives to just entertaining themselves through technology. Part of the problem is that many young people do not have a creative outlet to use when they are bored, so they turn to technology. In this unit I am offering them new experiences based in exploratory play. This will give the students the chance to really explore their creativity in a way that they might not have had the opportunity to before. This was strongly aligned to my initial goals. I did not intend to completely take technology away from my students. I wanted to create a curriculum that had a strong focus on positivity and self-awareness- two critical components I felt that my students needed in order to eventually post online. Through this unit I feel confident that my students will learn how to post online safely and feel comfortable posting their true selves and not just a "persona" of who they would like people to think they are. I felt that creating this experience in first grade could help my students have more awareness when they do get older and can post and use social media themselves.

Classroom Activities

Activity One: Exploring Digital Art Forms

Materials: computer/ projector, poster paper to be used by the teacher, blank paper to be used by the students, markers, pencils, crayons, one empty folder for each child.

To start, I will bring up different types of digital art forms and display them for the class through the projector. Websites that might be used for this activity are familyfriendpoems.com or poetryfoundation.org (both are listed in the resources section). After looking at and listening to some different poems or art forms, the students can discuss what they looked at and how it made them feel.

One main component of this curriculum is that students' take ownership of their work in the unit. In order to have a strong start with them "owning" it, they should be allowed to brainstorm their own ideas for what they might want to write about in their poetry. I would model this with the poster paper and jot down different things that I like and enjoy. The students would then do the same brainstorming and write down their own

ideas. It is important to remember that there are no right or wrong answers to this activity as students are exploring themselves and their creativity in this unit. Finally, when they are finished brainstorming their “mind map” can be stapled to the front of their new folder. This folder will serve as their poetry folder for the rest of the unit. Having their mind map stapled to the front will help them if they ever get stuck and need an idea to write about.

Activity Two: Emoji Poetry

Materials: Construction paper, scissors, glue, Emoji icons printed on computer paper or cardstock, drafting paper, pencils

This lesson serves as an introduction to Rebus poetry. However, instead of using random icons, emojis are used so that students can express themselves with something they are likely to be familiar with. In order to print emojis I go to getemoji.com. During the mini lesson I will explain that instead of writing some words out the students will use the emoji icons instead. For example, if I am writing about avocados, I would use the avocado emoji instead of writing the word avocado.

When the students are working, they should know what they want to write about first before they begin using the icons. For this reason, they will draft their piece on the drafting paper first using all the words necessary for their poem. When it is time for them to complete the poem, they can cut out the emojis they need and glue them on the construction paper. It will be important to remind the students that some words need to be written and then some words can be supplemented with an emoji. This lesson will require the students to reread their work and ensure it makes sense. The finished poems can be kept in their poetry folders and potentially used at their film festival/poetry slam.

In order to make this activity more digital, students can create these poems online by copying and pasting the emojis into a word document as they are writing their poem. This would eliminate the cutting and gluing aspect (which many young students need to further develop their fine motor skills) but it could completely digitize this lesson. Students could also create an emoji poem on a tablet. Using the “notes” app a student could write and paste the emojis directly on the tablet. This would make this activity feel very familiar to the students and it would show them how they could use a simple app to create something meaningful.

Activity Three: Sense Poetry

Materials: Sensory play items such as Play-Doh, bags of uncooked pasta or rice, bags of cut up pipe cleaners or plastic straws, pom-poms, and possibly slime (or any other sensory play items the teacher feels comfortable using with the class). Writing paper, pencils, poster paper to be used by the teacher, markers.

This is a very “hands-on” activity but can be digitized in simple ways. Students will look at examples of sense poetry online first to familiarize themselves with the structure and expectations of this style of poetry. When they are writing they can choose to type the poem as well.

In this lesson students will explore with four out of their five senses as none of these materials should be ingested. Students could use different foods that could be eaten with consent of parents and if teachers are allowed to give students food in their school. The teacher can run this lesson “center” style so that each student gets an opportunity to explore all the sensory options, or they can pick which item they would like to interact with which allows for more choice. Depending on if this is run as centers or as choice the timing will be different. The teacher can use their best judgement to determine how long the students need to play to

explore the way the objects feel, look, smell, and sound. I would implement centers at first so that all the items can be used by every student. Eventually I would switch to choice when students know what each item is and what they want to explore more.

After the students are done exploring the objects, they can write about them using their senses. I would model this for the students by using sentence frames. The frames could be as follows “It felt like _____. It smelled like _____. It looked like _____. It sounded like _____.” As the students become more comfortable writing these poems they can elaborate more and add their own writing style into it. When they are finished with the poem, they can store it in their poetry folder.

Activity Four: Blackout Poetry

Materials: Pages of text that have been printed out, black markers, paper, pencils

This lesson is an introduction to Found Poetry by using the “blackout” method. The teacher can decide if this is an exploratory activity with random text being used or content specific poetry. If the goal of the lesson is to be content specific, then the teacher may want to use an article or page from a textbook. For example, if the class was learning about habitats in science then I would use an article about coral reefs. Or, if I wanted to do a cross-curricular poem with math then I might use the math textbook provided by the district.

I will first model the activity for the students and explain that they will be using the text that they are starting with to create something new. There are multiple ways that students can create their own poems using this method, and it is important to remember that this curriculum is self-exploratory, and students need to do what feels right to them. I will explain that they can use the text and blackout certain words to create an image in the text or to create a new poem. Or, they can black out certain words and then use the words that they have left to write a new poem on their paper. Either option is fine as long as they are engaged and creating something new. As always, their poem can be stored in their poetry folder when the lesson is complete.

This lesson can also be made completely digital. Students can use a “Paint” style of editing app to black out words in a text online. This might also give the students more artistic freedom over the piece. Instead of using markers they can use different digital tools to “blackout” the words. For example, they can use different colors, make the words look erased, or even incorporate icons to put over certain words. Creating these poems digitally would give students an opportunity to explore online options and how they can change a piece. It would be interesting to have students complete one hard copy by hand and then use the same text to create something else online.

Activity Five: Film Festival/Poetry Slam Celebration

Materials: A safe space with a projector and screen for students to present their work such as classroom, cafeteria, or stage depending on your building. Student poems, artwork, or videos uploaded and posted on the screen through the projector. Invitations sent to family members, grade level partners, other staff, and administration. Light refreshments for the students and guests if that is permitted at your school.

These student presentations would be the last activity of this unit. After learning about all the different types of poetry and creating their own poems, artwork, or even films if they acted out their poems, the students would pick their favorite piece to put in the exhibit. This is similar to an art show but for poetry instead. Students will be sharing their persona and deciding on their audience. It will be important to remind them that when we “post” their work (I take a picture of it and project it onto the screen or uploads the video and plays

it) it is different from sharing it publicly online. We are sharing their work in this way to protect their ideas and keep their identities safe. In addition to this, my students are not old enough to have social media accounts and therefore it would not be right if I took their work and posted it online. In following the theme of safety students will be allowed to invite people to the event. I will allow the students to hand out invitations to people that they think deserve to come and be a part of their audience (this can be done digitally given the theme of the unit). This can lead to a great discussion about how you do not share personal things with people who you do not really know and are essentially strangers.

During the event the children will get up either one by one or in groups depending on which pieces they selected to be in the exhibit. They will present their work by reading it and explaining how and why they created it. The audience may ask questions if the child permits. This will again reiterate that the students had ownership of the creation and self-expression in these activities. After every child has presented, the light refreshments may be served since that this what would truly happen at a gala or exhibit.

All the work whether it was created by hand or digitally will be shared digitally through the projector. This will demonstrate to the students what it would be like to post their creations online and have them shared to a wider audience. By creating boundaries and parameters for how their work is shared demonstrates the importance of online safety and for my own students, parental consent.

Appendix

The standards I have aligned my curriculum to are the following from the Speaking and Listening category of the Common Core Standards:

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas:

Describe people, places, things, and events with relevant details, expressing ideas and feelings clearly.

Add drawings or other visual displays to descriptions when appropriate to clarify ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

By exploring digital art forms, creating their own, and presenting them to an audience my students will be expressing their ideas and feelings clearly. In addition to this, they will be allowed to add drawings, emojis, or create an image in found poetry. They also have the option to make a film or act out their poem to help clarify these ideas. Overall, my students will be describing and expressing their thoughts and feelings in new ways. When they present their project at our exhibition, they will be able to discuss their work. This will ensure that my students fully understand the purpose of the activities and their actions.

Annotated List of Resources

"Acrostic." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 5 May 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acrostic.: this webpage explains what acrostic style poetry is.

Burkhardt, Joanna M., Mary C. MacDonald, and Andrée J. Rathemacher. *Teaching Information Literacy: 35 Practical, Standards-based Exercises for College Students*. American Libr. Assoc., 2003.: This resource was designed for college professors to help college students with common writing misconceptions.

Chu, Samuel Kai-Wai, and David M. Kennedy. "Using Online Collaborative Tools for Groups to Co-Construct Knowledge." *Online Information Review*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2011, pp. 581-597., doi:10.1108/14684521111161945.: This journal article explores how teachers can use Google Docs or the Wiki platform in order for students to engage in collaborative online activities.

"Found Poems." Facing History and Ourselves. .: This webpage goes in depth to discuss what found poetry is. This website made me feel confident in understanding what found poetry was and how I could use it in my classroom.

Griss, Susan. "Creative Movement: A Language of Learning" *Educational Leadership* 51, no 5 (1994): 78-80.: This journal article discusses the importance of movement in schools and how it is beneficial to all students.

Hadaway, Nancy L., Sylvia M. Vardell, and Terrell A. Young. "Scaffolding Oral Language Development through Poetry for Students Learning English." *The Reading Teacher* 54, no. 8 (2001): 796-806. .: This journal article discusses how English language learners benefitted from daily poetry practice. The teacher in this article read and discussed poetry everyday with her students to explore how it affected English language learners.

Hasbrouck, Jan., Glaser, Deborah R. "Literacy Leadership Brief: Reading Fluently Does Not Mean Reading Fast". International Literacy Association. 2018. : This resource is from the International Literacy Association. It gives clear and concise examples to what reading fluency really is. It goes beyond the idea that reading fluently means reading fast.

Heitner, Devorah. *Screenwise: Helping Kids Thrive (and Survive) in Their Digital World*. ROUTLEDGE, 2018: This this book is geared towards parents who are facing digital challenges with their own children, I found it very relatable to some problems that I face in my classroom.

Hurt, Natalia. "5 Keys to a Creative Language Classroom." General Educator Blog. February 02, 2019. .: This is a teacher created blog. This post suggests different ways to invoke creativity into the classroom.

Lanier, Jaron. *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.: This book by Jaron Lanier explores how our identities are affected by technology. He poses many strong questions about what has happened to human kind with the increase of technology.

Lenhart, Amanda. "Teens, Online Stranger Contact, and Cyberbullying" University of Maryland, October 2008. : this online presentation showed the results from a study on teens and cyberbullying.

Lewis, Tynea. "Five Senses In Poetry." Family Friend Poems. .: the familyfriendpoems website has many different categories of poems to choose from in their library. The site also has resources and ideas for

teachers. This particular page discusses how to use the five senses in poetry.

Nia. "On The Internet, This Is Why Social Media Age Restrictions Matter." Eyerys. January 06, 2018. .: This webpage discusses age restrictions on different social media platforms.

"Play-based Learning: The Concept of Kids Learning by Playing." Portland. September 27, 2018. .: This is a blog from Concordia University-Portland. This post explores the importance of play in school after No Child Left Behind.

"Poetry Lesson Plans." NCTE Comprehensive News. .: this webpage is from the National Council of Teachers of English. It gives lesson plan ideas for poetry for all grades K-12.

"Reading Fluency: Speed, Accuracy, Expression, Oh My!" Scholastic. .: This resource from Scholastic explains the different attributes to reading fluency in the primary grades.

Sands, Crystal. "Why Children Need Poetry." HuffPost. August 07, 2017. .: This article posted in the Huffington Post explores the importance of poetry in the primary grades. The article explores the relationship between how people feel about poetry based on how it was taught to them in school.

"Speech and Language Developmental Milestones." National Institute of Deafness and Other Communication Disorders. October 04, 2018.: This webpage is from the U.S Department of Health and Human Services. It shares how language develops at various stages over time.

Torres, Rui. *Digital Poetry and Collaborative Wreadings of Literary Texts*. P. 4: This text explores how the digital age has changed the way people read and write since these activities can now be done online.

Wasik, Barbara A., and Mary Alice Bond. "Beyond the Pages of a Book: Interactive Book Reading and Language Development in Preschool Classrooms." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 93, no. 2 (2001): 243-50. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.93.2.243.: This journal article discussed the results of a study on preschool students. Some of the students had regular exposure to read alouds and vocabulary lessons while the others did not.

"Writing Acrostic Poems with Thematically Related Texts in the Content Areas - ReadWriteThink." Readwritethink.org. . This webpage discusses how to create a thematic poetry lesson based on a specific content area.

Notes

1. Burkhardt, Joanna M., *Teaching Information Literacy: 35 Practical, Standards-based Exercises for College Students*. Pg 38
2. Burkhardt, Joanna M., *Teaching Information Literacy: 35 Practical, Standards-based Exercises for College Students*. pg. 38
3. Burkhardt, Joanna M., *Teaching Information Literacy: 35 Practical, Standards-based Exercises for College Students*. Pg 40
4. Sands, Crystal. "Why Children Need Poetry." HuffPost. August 07, 2017.
5. Hadaway, Nancy L.,. "Scaffolding Oral Language Development through Poetry for Students Learning English." pg. 796
6. "Speech and Language Developmental Milestones." National Institute of Deafness and Other Communication Disorders. October 04, 2018.
7. Wasik, Barbara A., "Beyond the Pages of a Book: Interactive Book Reading and Language Development

in Preschool Classrooms."

8. Hurt, Natalia. "5 Keys to a Creative Language Classroom." General Educator Blog. February 02, 2019.
9. Heitner, Devorah. *Screenwise: Helping Kids Thrive (and Survive) in Their Digital World*. pg 3
10. Hasbrouck, Jan., "Literacy Leadership Brief: Reading Fluently Does Not Mean Reading Fast".
11. "Reading Fluency: Speed, Accuracy, Expression, Oh My!" Scholastic.
12. "Reading Fluency: Speed, Accuracy, Expression, Oh My!" Scholastic.
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14. "Acrostic." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 5 May 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acrostic.
15. "Poetry Lesson Plans." NCTE Comprehensive News.
16. "Found Poems." Facing History and Ourselves.
17. Lewis, Tynea. "Five Senses In Poetry." Family Friend Poems.
18. "Writing Acrostic Poems with Thematically Related Texts in the Content Areas - ReadWriteThink." Readwritethink.org.
19. "Play-based Learning: The Concept of Kids Learning by Playing." Portland. September 27,
20. "Play-based Learning: The Concept of Kids Learning by Playing." Portland. September 27, 2018.
21. Griss, Susan. "Creative Movement: A Language of Learning" pg. 78.
22. Heitner, Devorah. *Screenwise: Helping Kids Thrive (and Survive) in Their Digital World*.
23. Heitner, Devorah. *Screenwise: Helping Kids Thrive (and Survive) in Their Digital World*.
24. Torres, Rui. *Digital Poetry and Collaborative Wreadings of Literary Texts*. P. 4
25. Chu, Samuel Kai-Wai, "Using Online Collaborative Tools for Groups to Co-Construct Knowledge." 581-597.,
26. Chu, Samuel Kai-Wai, "Using Online Collaborative Tools for Groups to Co-Construct Knowledge." 581-597.
27. Lanier, Jaron. *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.
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30. Lenhart, Amanda. "Teens, Online Stranger Contact, and Cyberbullying"
31. Lenhart, Amanda. "Teens, Online Stranger Contact, and Cyberbullying"
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