



## Sharing Poetry With Children

Curriculum Unit 94.02.02  
by Roberta Mazzucco

Children have a natural affinity for poetry which begins with their first exposure to nursery rhymes and stories with repetitive lines such as “Good Night Moon.” In preschool and kindergartens much of the ritualistic “circle” or class “meeting” time is used in the recitation of finger plays such as “Itsy Bitsy Spider” and seasonal chants such as “Five Little Pumpkins.” From my own experience with kindergartners “The Gingerbread Man” is an all time favorite. Upon first reading the story it does not take long for children to join in on the well known refrain “Run run as fast as you can, You can’t catch me I’m the Gingerbread Man.” Interestingly enough this use of rhyme, rhythm, and chant usually takes place at a grade level which requires teachers to find, pick, and choose most of the literature and language experiences brought into the classroom. Because there is generally no set curriculum at this level the classroom teacher has a lot of choice in reading daily stories and finding new materials.

The use of rhymes and other short poems usually continues into the early grades. However, by the time a child reaches fourth grade the need to get every child reading and to expand that reading into content areas has already forced teacher and child into the basal reader. Here teachers begin to follow a book and workbook curriculum. There is so much to do that much of the spontaneity of the early childhood classroom has been inhibited by the need to cover a curriculum.

Most of the basal readers (and I include the new literature-based series) still rely on traditional stories and nonfiction pieces to teach reading. The use of poetry is very cursory and fragmented. A poem appears as part of a related group of stories or themes and then passes out of sight until the next theme is reached. In order to overcome this misuse or underuse of poetry, the teacher must see the relevance and necessity of including poetry in the curriculum and he/she must be willing to supplement the current curriculum in order to do this.

One might ask why this inclusion of poetry is not done if we have supposedly well-intentioned faculty who want to expose children to a variety of learning experiences. Also, wouldn’t their own educational experience have told them of the potential joy and insightfulness that poetry can afford the reader? Here we reach the crux of the problem. For many, poetry is a difficult and boring assignment to teach. Since the teacher may not have enjoyed poetry, the minimal amount in the reader is just fine. As is the case also with the state of science in many schools, there is a lack of confidence in teaching the subject, so it is avoided at all cost or minimally done. Even worse, the teacher’s lack of enthusiasm results in a half-hearted attempt to cover the poem.

Not surprisingly many of the books on the pedagogy of teaching language and literature presume that either teacher and/or student will have had a bad past experience in dealing with poetry. The authors then set out some of the reasons why poetry has been so maligned: excessive analysis of the poem; too much emphasis on “finding the meaning”; being made to memorize poems as part of class activities; and the use of single poems in isolation that may be very abstract or not of interest to the child.(1)

Analysis in itself is not bad if done in moderation and in the right spirit. It is always to be pursued insofar as it illuminates the poem for the reader on his/her appropriate level. Certainly the analysis of a fourth grader would not be the same as that of a high school student. Primarily the trouble seems to begin when analysis takes on a larger dimension than the poem itself. One of the basic beliefs of whole language teaching is that it is ineffective to teach children to read and write through the study of spelling, language, phonics, etc., in isolation of each other. In a whole language classroom students are presented with a piece of literature, and those elements of grammar, spelling, and phonetic analysis that apply to that piece of fiction are pointed out depending on the sophistication of the children and the intricacy of the piece. The story or poem is always the focal point, and the relevance that the child can draw from it - given his/her unique life experience - is where all discussions begin. Therefore, a poem is first presented to the child as a whole to be enjoyed. The parts of that whole - which include rhyme, rhythm, meter, and figurative language - are pointed out insofar as they enhance or clarify a child’s understanding and appreciation of the poem. Surely no poem is analyzed purely as an exercise to teach poetic devices. If teachers do this the poem only becomes its different parts and the “whole” is missed.

Finding the “meaning” is another activity which has driven students away from poetry. Surely any number of readers can read a poem and find many layers of meaning within its structure. At the elementary level poetry should always be offered up for students to find their own connection to, if any. As no child is forced to like every story they read, the child should also be left to decide the meaning or importance of poems. The presentation of a poem to children should always use their reaction to it as a baseline for beginning a discussion. If the poem is relevant and timely to children then one may proceed to elicit what it is that the child found meaningful and how the writer accomplished this. If the teacher becomes the dispenser of the “correct meaning,” then the reader is lost. At the elementary level the teacher needs to foster confidence in the child’s ability to render his feelings about the poem and begin from there.

In thinking about my own students I find that their response to literature is usually very limited. To engage in a conversation about the literature often leads to long moments of dead air when the teacher wishes he/she had chosen a different piece of literature. I’m sure that the experts would probably say that the teacher is at fault for not questioning in a more clever manner. Many times there isn’t much to say about an individual poem but teachers feeling the necessity to fill the air with the sound of voices - if only their own - rely too much on the continuing conversation as a barometer showing whether a lesson is successful. In the world of the elementary student, critical analysis tends to be one-word adjectives of the very most nebulous kind. I would further suspect that the reason for this can also be laid at the doorstep of teacher-centered learning, in which many students have no real experience in being asked their opinion, let alone in expressing it.

What has intrigued me since we began our course of study has been the question how a teacher can sustain a conversation about poetry. I have come to believe that it is the devices of poetry - rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration etc. - which are ways of getting children into a poem. For example, one literary device we expose children to in the fourth grade is onomatopoeia. This is taught by rereading an excerpt from one of the stories in our anthology wherein the author uses sound words for the noise of firecrackers during a Chinese New Year celebration. I think that poetry can teach things like onomatopoeia just as well if not better. I would suggest

that the reading of a poem such as Poe's "The Bells" would be more theatrical and really put the point across more effectively. The poem is divided into four sections in which Poe speaks of four very different kinds of bells. The first are the bells upon a sleigh that "...tinkle,tinkle,tinkle,/ In the icy air of night!" The second section speaks of wedding bells and the "world of happiness their harmony foretells!" The third type of bells are those of alarm bells and "how they clang and clash and roar." Finally there are the bells of death where we hear "the moaning and the groaning of the bells." In dealing with prose in the classroom we now teach a consistent framework with which students can approach pieces of fiction and nonfiction. We do this because our students have no background preparing them to read with an eye to comprehending a story and seeing detail. We begin with predictions about the piece in which we take into consideration the title, illustrations if any, and a look at the first few paragraphs so as to gain a frame of reference, even if that reference may not be supported by what we find in the actual story. If it is a nonfiction piece we may do a KWL chart (what I know, what I want to know, and what I learned) by which to measure what preconceptions and knowledge we come to the piece with, and what we actually learn that may alter or enhance our previous body of experience.

Many of these techniques can be used to approach a poem. Thus, before reading "The Bells," the class might first do a webbing in which they offer what they know about bells, their use, where we see them, etc. After this the teacher would ask the students if they felt this to be a strange subject for a writer to choose. With all this in mind we could proceed to read the poem. Later we might - as we do with prose - summarize the poem by taking each section and elaborating on the different types of bells and the words that Poe uses to express his ideas. The poem mentions different occurrences, at least some of which the children would have experience with.

Subsequently, children might practice reading the poem aloud, keeping in mind how the subject of each section would suggest a different tone of voice. Later, groups of students would be encouraged to reread and practice the poem with each group performing their reading. A possible writing assignment would be for each group to write down how their stanza should be read and why. A poetry writing assignment might occur from children thinking about bells in their own life - namely, school bells. I could see students expanding on the fact that there is the sound of the bell in the morning at the beginning of school and how it makes them feel, and then expanding in the same way on bells for lunch and gym and going home. Perhaps a group of students could each take one of these bells and contribute to a group poem about bells.

The beauty of poetry and its basic difference from prose is that for the most part it allows us to see words used for their maximum effect. Poems are usually short enough so that we can see the purposefulness in the choices that a poet makes in vocabulary more readily than in prose. If we choose poems that are story-like and build toward those with more emphasis or feeling on the expression of an abstract thought, we can give a framework to students which will keep them from becoming part of the vast majority of readers who will tackle any novel, but shrink at the thought of poetry.

I remember reading that in American schools we seldom teach art. Somehow we view artistic expression as a gift given only to certain people. Thus at an early age young children will announce that they cannot draw and will shrink from doing it. The Japanese, on the other hand, see drawing as much as a skill to be taught as an art. They teach drawing to their students with no thought other than that it is another subject. The defeatist attitude toward poetry among us is an accepted one, much like the readily accepted confession from many people that they are not math students. But again, foreign schools teach this subject as a skill to be mastered without the notion that one must be of the stature of Einstein to be very good at it. Another relevant example is that of the game of chess. In Russia learning chess is a normal part of the school curriculum, while in our

country we see chess playing as a product of genius rather than training. The fear surrounding these areas is shrouded in myth, which the educational establishment should seek to expose, or our future citizens will be afraid to write, or draw, or make change at the store.

As to the schedule for presenting poetry, most of the literature suggests that it must be an ongoing activity within the classroom.(2) Teachers need to acquire poems they consider appropriate for their students' age and interests through trial and error. What works with one set of students may completely fail with another. Poetry should be a regular part of the classroom, permeating all aspects of the curriculum. Because of the short length of many poems, they are convenient for teachers to use whenever the moment seems appropriate. Here again there is the danger that every lull becomes the time for the teacher to whip out a poem. Poetry needs to come in at relevant and timely moments. A poem for every day and every occasion can be overkill. We want neither to keep poetry a secret that most readers cannot fathom, nor to trivialize it so as to make it banal.

Most of the literature suggests that any unit on poetry should presume that children have been listening to poems from the beginning of the year and that this is not just a two or three week foray into a genre which will then be forgotten. The literature on poetry and young children also suggests the strong tie between the reading and writing of poetry. The writing of poems is to be strongly encouraged because it not only helps the child to understand the poets' craft but affords the child another outlet for expressing his/her ideas and emotions.(3)

Kenneth Koch in his book: "Rose, Where Did You Get That Red," details lessons he has used to get children to write poetry. His method generally begins with the reading of a poem that would suggest a topic for children to write their own poems about. He suggests that children can understand and respond to what we would term "great poetry." For him, much of what passes for children's poetry is insulting to their abilities and definitely not challenging. He does also mention that those children he taught were eager to write poems and had experience with reading and writing poetry before. I would take a more cautious view in dealing with my students. For many of them, reading is difficult enough and to be asked to write is worse. I would prefer to begin with what Koch might consider the cute, funny poems, just as a way of building confidence. I think Koch's description of the prior positive feeling his students have had shows how important building a background in poetry is.

To build a background can and should involve a variety of different activities with the poems selected.

*Choral reading:* It is important to remember that poetry should be read aloud so that the beauty and nuances of rhyme and rhythm can be appreciated. In doing this the teacher may have the class read together or divide the group, with each reading a different part.

*Setting verse to music:* By its rhythmic nature music affords a valuable link between prose and poetry. A familiar song and its use of rhythm and tempo can be useful in a child's understanding of those devices in a poem. Students may be asked to choose appropriate background music for their own poetry.

*Creative Dramatics:* Children may act out poems that describe certain events or people - for instance, "The Night Before Christmas."

*As an introduction to a special unit or project:* A science project on the weather might commence with children reading a number of poems about different aspects of weather. In studying Martin Luther King one might begin with a couple of poems about him.

*Use poetry for art activities:* Have students draw pictures to accompany their favorite poems. Students could also be given pictures or draw pictures and then try to find or write a poem they feel will be a good accompaniment.

Use the writing of poetry to enhance content areas: Koch suggested a format called the "I used to/But Now" Poem. In the content areas a child might use this as a measuring device for what they learned in a unit. One teacher used it as the basis for a group poem that resulted after the study of the American Revolution. In part it read:

I USED TO THINK that Florida was one of the thirteen colonies,  
BUT NOW I KNOW it belonged to Spain.

I USED TO THINK the War for Independence was one battle,  
BUT NOW I KNOW it was made up of many battles.(4)

Setting up a poetry center: Have an area with books of poetry, both published books and collections put together by students. Make a tape recorder available so that students may listen to cassettes of poetry and/or make their own recordings of their favorite poems.

In thinking about the integration of poetry into the curriculum, it seemed to me that many aspects of the opening of school make it an ideal time to begin laying a foundation for the year-long study of poetry. First, the calendar is somewhat fragmented as we begin school in August and then are off for Labor Day, returning only to be out for the Jewish holidays. Within this schedule, many of us are also preparing for the Connecticut Mastery Test at the end of the month. Since we often do not begin a regular schedule until after the testing, this is a time when poetry can be used to provide the beginning study of literature. September is also that time in which we try to introduce our students to class routines, new classmates and a new teacher. It has long been an axiom in teaching that children need to feel some success as they begin any new undertaking. Since the students in many classrooms often have a wide range of abilities, it is necessary to choose activities which can accommodate all of them. In perusing teacher's magazines and monthly activity books, one usually finds a number of appropriate poems for the beginning of school. I chose a poem called "School" and one called "Homework" - two subjects inspiring keen interest and anxiety in returning students. They are humorous poems which describe the school day and the dreaded homework assignment. Both poems can also be used as choral readings for students on the first day of school. Since most teachers try to include some kind of introductory or "getting to know you" activity, the writing of some simple shape poems can be fun and non-threatening. The sharing of poems would continue with more seasonal poetry.

Perhaps the most popular time of the year, for our students, next to Christmas is Halloween. Stories of ghosts and witches consume the attention of most of the children and they repeat local tales of recurring ghosts that walk in the neighborhood graveyard as well as the Freddy Krueger stories they watch on television. Poems such as "The Hag" by Robert Herrick, "At The Keyhole" by Walter de la Mare, and "Witches' Charm" by Ben Johnson have a combination of simplicity and ghoulishness which the children will love. I would also include the witches' song from Macbeth and ask the students to write their own poems about a witch's spell. Students love this kind of descriptive horror and respond well to a brainstorming session on appropriate words. This type of lesson also lends itself to choral and individual readings as well as art work, and the choosing of appropriate background music.

Whenever we try to acquaint students with the lives of famous historical figures we often run into prose pieces that are very superficial and allow for no response from students. In talking about Lincoln one is often left with the same tired stories about his poor childhood and how he read by dim firelight. There are, however, many

poems about Lincoln which show how highly he was regarded and provide different points of view on his life. The poem "Nancy Hanks" by Rosemary Benet introduces Lincoln's dead mother inquiring about her son and what kind of life he had. Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" is a mournful comparison of Lincoln as the leader of the metaphoric ship - America. Finally, in Vachel Lindsay's "Abraham Lincoln Walks At Midnight," the spirit of Lincoln is disturbed by the continued fighting of mankind - this time World War I. Perhaps this last poem might be used to have students write about what is happening in our world - indeed in our neighborhoods -that might keep Lincoln's spirit in a state of unrest. The title might be used as a first line, and the students would finish the poem with the reason why he is restless. These poems offer a chance to talk about point of view and to allow children to see the remarkable influence that a person can have long after their death.

Within the reading series that we use there is a great emphasis placed upon the ecological well-being of our planet. There are also a lot of special curriculums offered to our school about aspects of the environment, and how the children and their families can have a positive effect on the future. The rain forest is one of the areas we study in social studies, as well as endangered life in other regions of the world. The inclusion of some poetry on plants and animals would therefore be most appropriate. I thought that Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" offers some seemingly simple verse which children could appreciate. Again, there is a spooky quality to the story and the incidents within it are ones that students would enjoy. Coleridge makes much use of alliteration and rhyme in the poem. I have found that the children love playing with words and thinking up alliterative phrases. In fact I have found it gratifying to see them ask to continue a lesson on alliteration so they could continue the word play. The meaningless killing of the albatross and its consequences are paralleled by the meaningless violence that many of them have witnessed in their own lives. I know that there are some tape recordings of the poem and it may or may not need condensing but that is up to the individual teacher. I know that there are many possible readings of the poem but for my students I suggest an emphasis on those lines which read "He prayeth best, who loveth best All things both great and small; For the dear God who loveth us, He made and loveth all."

We try to explain the disregard that people have had for many species of life and why they are now extinct. In studying the American Indians we try to explain that their contribution has been their great respect for the land and the creatures that share the earth with them. The herds of buffalo were seriously depleted by Easterners who merely used them for target practice while riding across the plains on the railroad. They were not used for food, or clothing, or shelter. They were killed on a whim. Much the same can be said for the albatross which was itself an omen of good luck. I think the poem intriguing enough to capture the students interest and stimulate some of their own ideas.

I'm sure that there are many possible writing assignments that could come from a poem like this, but I would like to see if the children couldn't put themselves in the Mariner's position and choose someone they would like to deliver a message or lesson to. Who would it be? And what would they say? It might be a member of their family or the principal of our school, a politician or someone in class. Those who wished to might try to copy Coleridge's pattern and write in four-line stanzas with the second and fourth lines rhyming.

Finally, one of the groups of stories we read deals with parents and children. In these stories there are parents who are deceived by their children and some who are blind to their children's faults. In another story, a little girl is taught a valuable lesson by her grandmother. It seems appropriate that one might here include the famous speech from Hamlet in which Polonius gives advice to his son Laertes before he leaves home (Act I, scene 3). Polonius cautions against speaking too much, borrowing and lending, and getting into arguments - among other things. This could inspire each child to write a list of advice for a child entering school, or

perhaps to recount the advice they have gotten from their parents about how to get along in the world.

Hopefully the reader will be able to tap into many of his/her own favorite poems in order to make the experience of poetry a valuable one for students. The thing to remember about using adult poetry in the elementary classroom is that it is not necessary that the child fully understand the poem. Koch states that a poem can be useful even if it is only used to suggest a poetical topic or offers a pattern for the child to follow. Complicated explanations or dissections of the poetry are to be avoided, as they are unnecessary and fruitless.

### Sample Lesson Plan # 1- Alliteration

#### *Objectives:*

The students will be able to:

1. recognize alliteration in a poem or prose.
2. write an example of alliteration (the repetition of the same beginning sound) by adding appropriate words to a given noun.

#### *Materials Needed:*

Copies of tongue twisters, poems with alliterative lines, and prose lines with alliteration.

#### *Vocabulary:*

Alliteration, repetition. Teachers may also find it helpful to reinforce the concepts of noun, verb, adjective, and adverb.

#### *Procedures:*

Present students with several tongue twisters. Teacher: Who can repeat these rhymes?The children should be given ample enough time to try their hand at this.

Teacher: Why is it so hard to say these lines?Students will realize that it is because of the repetition of sounds. Teacher: So repeating sounds can be funny. Look at these descriptions from a story in our book. How did the author use these phrases? Did he want to be funny? If not, then what was the reason for using alliteration?

An example of a suitable story would be "Sailing" from the fourth grade reader "Feast Your Eyes." The story concerns a family traveling along the prairie to a new life in the West. Here the writer has descriptive expressions such as "red rocks of the South," "endless grass," (please note that alliteration can occur at the end of words too) and "one of the hawks rose higher and higher." The alliteration is not for amusement, but to add to the description.

Teacher: Now that we have seen what alliteration is and how it can be used in different ways by a writer, let's see if we can't make up some alliterative descriptions together.

On the board write four or five nouns such as breeze, house, lion, snake, and neighbor. Have students suggest words that can be added to these nouns to make an alliterative effect (noisy nose neighbor). After seeing the different uses of alliteration it would be time for students to work in cooperative groups in which they would be given a list of a series of nouns. The group would be asked to add descriptive words, which would result in a review of adjectives, adverbs, and verbs. After giving students fifteen to twenty minutes to complete the assignment it would be good to meet together as a class and have the group recorders share their responses. The teacher might list all these on a chart so students could see the endless possibilities.

*Follow Up Activities:*

Add tongue twisters and alliterative poems to the library corner. Give students a chance to record themselves saying some of these phrases on tape. Encourage students to try alliteration in their own writing.

Sample Lesson Plan #2 - Writing an Animal Poem

*Objective:*

To write a class poem called a Diamante, which is a diamond shaped poem. The layout of the poem is as follows:

noun

adjective adjective

participle participle participle

noun noun noun noun

adjective adjective

noun

This type of poem sets up a contrast between the subject represented by the noun in the first line and the opposite noun in the last line. Student will have an opportunity to play with words and extend their understanding of opposites and words used to describe opposites.

*Vocabulary:*

Diamante, contrast, opposites, and participle. Review of the terms noun, and adjective.

*Procedure:*

A lot of the fourth grade curriculum centers on the study of animals and their environments. All of the classes in our school usually go to the zoo as part of this study. I would propose that this particular lesson might take place after such a trip. Teacher: I have placed on the board pairs of words (hot, cold; sad, happy; funny, serious; etc.) Can anyone tell me something about each of these pairs? Students should be able to recognize that they are opposites.

Teacher: I was thinking that many of the animals we saw on our trip have qualities that make them the opposite of other animals. For instance when I think of a lion I think of an animal that is very dangerous and



fierce. Now when I try to think of an animal that has the opposite qualities I think of a mouse which is small and not very scary. Today I thought we would try writing a new type of poem called a diamante because it is shaped like a diamond. I have the pattern here on the board and it only requires thirteen words - but very exact words. It is a poem about opposites. I've decided that I'm going to use the lion and the mouse to write this poem. They will be the subjects of the poem so the lion will be the noun on the top and the mouse will be the noun on the bottom. I need you to help me find the right words to finish the poem.

The lesson will continue with the teacher having the students suggest the appropriate words to use.

Here is an example of the possible poem:

Lion

Proud, Fierce

Roaring, Stalking, Hungry

Big, Jungle, Cheese, Trap

Tiny, Meek

Mouse

Please note that the first three and one half lines describe the lion, while in the second half of the third line the description turns to the mouse which is the bottom noun in the poem.

*Follow Up Activities:*

The poem can be written and displayed in the class. Students may want to copy it down in their writing journals. The format should remain available for students to try on their own. At another time the diamante can be used to write about seasons or weather, etc. Students will benefit from seeing the multiplicity of purpose a poetical form can have.

Sample Lesson Plan #3 Responding to the reading of the first section of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

*Objectives:*

Students will

1. listen to the reading of the poem.
1. fill in on a map the probable course of the Mariner and his ship.
2. do some research on the Albatross.
3. draw a picture of some event or image within the poem, such as: the storm, the albatross, the ship in the storm or in the arctic, the killing of the bird, etc. Students will choose lines from the poem to caption their pictures. Ideally each child might pick a different segment of the poem.

### *Materials:*

A copy of the poem for each child, markers, crayons, drawing paper, access to a library or research materials, and copies of world maps for students to trace on.

### *Procedures:*

The poem can be introduced at Halloween time as a kind of scary story that has ghosts, spirits and a strange old man. In reading the poem the students should be clear on what a Mariner is as well as what life was like on an old ship. It is probably best for continuity's sake that the teacher do the first reading of the poem. The activities described here would probably be best after a rereading of the poem when the students have become more comfortable with the language of the poem and the events.

### *Follow Up Activities:*

Make a tape recording of the poem available in the listening center for students to use. There is one by Richard Burton available on tape. Let each student practice reading a different stanza of the poem and record them all for the class to listen to. Have students continue this activity as the poem is reread and collect the pictures into a book.

### Endnotes

1. Hoskisson and Cole, "Language Arts: Content and Teaching Strategies," 346-347.
2. Ibid, 369.
3. Ibid, 349.
4. Ibid, 356.

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