

The Ruth & Ted Braun Awards for Writing Excellence at Saginaw Valley State University

Selling Poetry: Pushy with Pizzazz

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Elden Kohn grew up and resides in Auburn, Michigan--a small town where faith and academics have been nurtured by family and friends. He enjoys writing as a way to express himself and his faith in Jesus Christ and as a means of critically analyzing what he has learned in school. As a fifth year student at Saginaw Valley, he looks forward to student teaching in the fall of 2004 and completing his degree in Elementary Education.

From baby babble to bedtime lullabies, word play and the sound of words are an important part of children's early development. Indeed, without songs and rhymes like "Ten Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed" and "Now I Know my ABC's," helping children learn such important concepts as number and the alphabet would be much more complicated. But rhythm and rhyme—poetry—make learning easier (and more fun). Poetry is pleasing to the ear, comforting to the soul, and exciting to the tongue; it stretches the mind—a literal "food for thought." Yet, despite the obvious impact of poetic verse early in life, the power of poetry is increasingly ignored as children progress through their education. This is a shame, for just as development does not stop, neither do the educational benefits of poetry. In fact, the use of poetry in the classroom offers students a variety of benefits, which teachers can help bring to life.

If poetry is such an effective learning tool, one must ask the question, "Why isn't it used more?" The answer is simple: attitude. Many teachers and students simply have lost their taste for poetry. Why? Because rather than being a source of learning and enjoyment, poetry itself becomes something to be learned. One study describes the poetry experiences of many student teachers as "a surgical dissection of verse and form" (Warburton and Campbell).

According to Cariello, this emphasis on formulaic writing activities and identification of poetic devices creates "a poetry of constriction rather than expansion" (833). In other words, a poem becomes the end rather than the means. Too often, this means that the only thing learned is a distaste for poetry.

However, this is not the only reason why poetry has become the "literary equivalent of liver" (McClure qtd. in Perfect 731). Perfect highlights several additional issues: "fear, lack of comfort, teachers who feel compelled to teach reading skills, anxiety over method and knowledge, negative school experiences, and overanalysis and interpretation" (731). The idea of interpretation is especially important. Rather than being allowed to derive personal meaning from a poem, students are often required to dissect it to uncover the teacher's meaning (732). This practice effectively severs students' personal connections to a poem, making poetry just another exercise, not a true meaning-making experience. This and other issues concerning poetry point out a destructive cycle: students learn to dislike poetry; former students become teachers who dislike poetry; poetry is either neglected or poorly taught; new students learn to dislike poetry. And the cycle continues . . .

Unless teachers do something about it. It is teachers who play the pivotal role in how (and whether) students experience poetry. The literature is unanimous in suggesting that time be specifically dedicated to poetry—5, 10, 15 minutes or more on a daily basis. But this is not enough. Time itself does not change attitudes; teachers need to “fight fire with fire.” They must be “joyfully literate mentor[s]” (Denman qtd. in Perfect 731), serving as models both for how to write poetry (Routman, “Everyone”) as well as for how to enjoy it (Perfect 734). In each case, enthusiasm is key. Also important are openness and honesty: teachers must share their own feelings and guide students to connections between poems and their own lives (Perfect 735). Sometimes this means meeting students halfway and exploring more contemporary and less recognized types of poetry, such as popular song lyrics (Warburton and Campbell). Whatever the poetic medium, it is the teacher who makes the difference.

And when one explores the benefits of poetry, it becomes quite clear that the difference can be great. Just as those early songs and rhymes help children learn important new concepts, continued exposure to poetry offers a chance for continued cognitive growth, especially in the areas of symbolic thought and meaning making. Nowak-Fabrykowski sheds light on the basic fact that in order to learn, it is critical that children be able to think symbolically. For children, “language is the primary medium for symbolic behavior.” However, there is not an innate connection between word (symbols) and thought; this connection grows and develops through experience (Vygotsky qtd. in Nowak-Fabrykowski). Reading and writing poetry provide children with this experience. Through these processes, children stretch their imaginations to represent new ideas and ask questions to clarify symbolic representations they are unsure of.

This creating and questioning leads to the related cognitive ability of meaning making. It is true that poetry can “help us see things in new ways” (Perfect 729). However, children must first understand what a poem is saying before gaining such insight. As Elster points out, “ambiguities and gaps in meaning force the reader to take an especially active role in constructing meaning” (71). Readers do this in different ways: summarizing, considering the text world (73), relating the outside world (74), going beyond literal text meanings, reading aloud, and making links to other texts (75). Each of these methods requires readers to actively construct their own understanding of a poem. In doing so, children practice important meaning-making skills that are critical for learning in all subject areas.

Not surprisingly, the subject areas that are affected most by the use of poetry are reading and writing. Poetry lends itself naturally to oral performance (Perfect 730), allowing children to hear the wonderful possibilities language holds.

When children read poetry themselves, rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia, and other language devices provide exposure to phonics and make learning the connection between sounds and symbols more interesting (Ediger). Poetry carries added significance for struggling readers: its shortened lines and more limited content are less intimidating than traditional prose, giving readers a greater chance of success (Durham). Success in reading poetry can build the confidence and motivation necessary for further development.

This also holds true for writing. The greater freedom with form gives all writers a chance for success and confidence building. Struggling writers and proficient writers alike can experience improved word choice and increased enjoyment of creativity, while not constrained by formal grammatical conventions (Routman, “Kids”). That is not to say that poetry and grammar do not mix. On the contrary, poems are “rich sources of punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, conversation, parts of speech, [and] verb tenses” (George). Thus, poetry offers multiple instructional possibilities. Teachers’ effective use of poetry can unlock both the imaginative and technical skills necessary for good composition, while providing opportunities for success that motivate students to continue writing.

A critical component of this motivation is the development of voice. Kuhlman and Bradley suggest that “voice is a composite of others’ voices and one’s own manipulation, interpretation, and reuse of words.” Clearly, reading poetry provides children with a rich reservoir of words and ideas from which to develop their own voice. Writing poetry is the other half of the equation. This is where children can experiment with voice, combining their own ideas with what they have heard to develop their writing self. Because poetry is more “free-flowing” and “non-restrictive,” it is especially conducive to experimentation and development of voice; one student referred to it as “talking on paper.” Once children have developed a voice in poetry, they can move on to experiment with voice in other genres.

Cognitive abilities, as well as reading and writing skills, are what schools are often most concerned about; there is no doubt that poetry delivers in these areas. However, it does much more. As a matter of fact, poetry’s greatest strength lies in its ability to touch the soul—its emotional appeal. It is clear that this “affective power” (Durham) can have a profound impact on children’s desire to read and write. But it can also affect how children approach other subject areas, such as math and science. Perfect states, “When children are encouraged to see a content area topic from an aesthetic perspective, a whole new dimension of thought and appreciation opens up” (730). By “bringing heart and head together” (730), learning becomes more personal and, therefore, more important.

Even more valuable than the connection to content that poetry provides is the opportunity for connection with others and our inner selves (Perfect 729). In a diverse society,

children need to learn about others—their feelings, their views, their ways of life. Poetry gives students a peek into these otherwise baffling and often secluded areas. Children also need to learn about themselves. Dakos states, “All human beings need time to reflect, create, celebrate, and rest” (33). How true, especially for children. As they progress through school, faced with peer pressure and confusing new facts, children need time to make sense of it all. Poetry offers some relief. Dakos claims that poetry can help children talk about and learn to accept failure (33); it can also give them a chance to discuss the painful side of life—death, good-byes, and other hurtful moments (36). Considered in this context, poetry is a holistic tool for educators. It is a way of meeting the needs of the whole child, ignoring neither academics nor emotions.

The benefits of poetry are indeed great; however, no benefits can be reaped until the poetic seeds are sowed in the classroom. That is, teachers must find a way to put poetry into action. Most important for this to happen is that poetry materials be made available in the classroom. Several poetry books should be readily accessible for browsing; in addition, a poetry box containing single laminated poems (either typed by the teacher or cut out from children's magazines) provides children with easy access to poetry (Baranek). Once poetry is made available, the proper environment must be created. Teachers must help foster “a classroom environment that is safe, supportive, and open to exploration and experimentation,” allowing the class to become a “community of poetry readers and writers” (Perfect 735). When the materials are available and the atmosphere is comfortable, the poetry experience can begin.

The literature offers a plethora of venues for incorporating poetry into classrooms; those strategies that appear most effective bring poetry to life through oral activities. The most basic of these is a simple reading aloud of poems, either by the teacher or by students. Durham suggests that teachers create a “Poetry Request Box” (76) where students can suggest poems to be read by the teacher or ones that they wish to present themselves. Students should also be given an opportunity to share poems they have written (Routman, “Kids”), whether in small groups or with the whole class. The “author's chair” offers a special place in the classroom for students to share their work, just as publication and poetry festivals are ways for children to share poetry outside of the classroom (Durham). These shared text experiences offer opportunities for whole class discussion, giving students a chance to ask questions, construct meaning, and hear others' views.

Another oral activity for utilizing poetry is dramatization. Students can use puppets and other props to enact poems (Perfect 734). In addition, they can rehearse and present poems to live audiences around the school, such as the school secretary or other classes (George). Dakos, who

believes in the importance of play for young children, suggests “playing poetry” (34): children can bring their own toys from home to use as props and can dress up to act out poems. Finally, poetry and drama centers (areas in the classroom dedicated to specific activities for individuals or small groups) offer an excellent opportunity for students to recite and perform poetry (Stone). While these activities by no means exhaust the ways in which poetry can be made part of the classroom, they are a good starting point.

It is clear that the potential benefits poetry holds for students are great—too great to be ignored. From expansion of the mind to soothing of the soul, poetry gives students an opportunity to grow both academically and emotionally. But this does not happen by accident. Teachers must intentionally and thoughtfully make poetry an intimate part of the classroom. They must foster in students a love for poetry not only by making it available, but also by making it real and fun. In short, the teacher must become both the poet and the salesperson of poetry: a little pushy, but pushy with pizzazz.

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