



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2014 Volume II: Playing with Poems: Rules, Tools, and Games

The ABCs of Elementary Reading and Writing Poetry with Animals

Curriculum Unit 14.02.05, published September 2014

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Introduction

This unit will lead elementary students through reading and discussing a wide variety of animal poetry ranging from Mary Ann Hoberman to Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Students will be learning about the use of similes, metaphors, alliteration and idioms in poetry. The idea that "it is only through the animal that we recognize our humanity" ¹ and then learn to be the type of person we will become is a basis for why animals were chosen as the theme to study. The animal is an important part of the social world of children and has a direct impact on their development. Adrian Franklin concluded that for children pets encouraged healthy psychological development. ² In a 2008 study children were asked to talk about places and people that are important to them; animals were not a focus of the study. Ninety percent of the respondents brought up how significant animals are to them—from their pets to insects to animals in their neighborhood. ³ When asking a child to read and write about the world around them, it makes sense to start from a point where they already have a good deal of interest and personal experience. ⁴ Their ability to notice needs, details and relationships is often is with family pets that a child is first able to express and understand empathy. This unit will allow students to read great poetry, understand what the author notices about animals, and then create similar types of poems about animals in their own lives. I am hopeful that students will take as much joy and pleasure from hearing great poems and through creating their own poetry, as they do when given watercolors and paper with the license to just paint, create, and enjoy.

Rationale

The San Jose area is home to the largest concentration of technology expertise in the world with more than 6,600 technology companies employing more than 254,000 people. ⁵ With more than 100 different languages and dialects spoken in the San Jose metropolitan area, it is the ninth most linguistically varied metro area in the nation. ⁶ Nestled at the base of the East Foothills, Mt. Pleasant Elementary STEAM Academy has vistas rich with rolling hills and cityscapes, and is in the heart of a multi-culturally rich area. Despite being nestled in this wealthy environment, our school has struggled for many years with the achievement gap. Specifically in our

school the students that are Vietnamese are on average 75% proficient on state tests, while the Hispanic students are approximately 40% proficient on the same tests. A similar gap appears in schools all over the country. The question of how to address it is one that teachers and administrators struggle with every year. Our school decided on an approach that allows for more hands-on and practical type of learning experiences.

Mt. Pleasant Elementary STEAM Academy is a school in transition, changing into a science, technology, engineering, art, and math focused school serving

students in grades Pre-K - 5. This past year was the first year of the transition and adopting Common Core learning standards. The hope was that the focus of the school would retain current students and attract new students to our school.

The regular staff includes fifteen teachers, an intervention teacher, a science teacher, a part-time music teacher, and an English Language Development Specialist. In addition, the district provides a part-time psychologist, health clerk, speech therapist, and library technician. There is also a full time counselor provided by Foothill Community Health Center. Our student population is currently 362 students with 82% being Hispanic. Asian students are the next largest group at 9%. We have six students identified as Gifted and Talented (GATE) and 52 in Special Education (RSP), and 245 (67%) are designated Limited English Proficiency (LEP). 45% of the students receive free or reduced lunch.

All classrooms are self-contained at our school, though there is a daily 30 minute change school-wide for English Language Development (ELD) instruction. Students' English proficiency is given a score between 1-5 and they then move to be grouped with students with similar scores. Our school and district have seen a problem that students seem to be stuck at Intermediate (level 3) and do not progress beyond that point. Many professional development days have been spent analyzing this problem. I taught the level 3 students this past year and did a unit of poetry that lasted 2 weeks. There was not thematic focus, but we read several different types of poems from haikus to sonnets and the students created some of their own. They really enjoyed the unit and I realized that poetry could become a reading and writing bridge for these students to access new vocabulary and improve their grammar skills without a fear of doing something wrong. Rules exist, but it is ok to break them, as long as a reader can still understand what you are trying to say. This was incredibly freeing for them and I found that even reluctant readers were more inclined to read aloud.

Information on Figurative Language

In order to teach this unit well, a basic understanding of what figurative language is and how it is used effectively in poetry is paramount for the teacher to understand and impart to his or her students. The idea that sometimes what you mean is not exactly what you say, and may in fact be the opposite, is an intimidating idea for readers at all levels, including teachers to grasp. Robert Frost said, "Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words." ⁷ Teachers should highlight, translate, and help their students to understand the difference between figurative language and literal meaning when teaching poetry. You don't have to hold the key or answer to a poem's meaning. You need to open the instruction and give the students the information necessary to find their own meaning. In my ELD class, we looked at Sandra Cisneros's "Hair" which describes the different members of her family's hair and how they are all different. In it, the father's hair is described as "like a broom, all up in the air" while her mother's is likened

to "little candy circles all curly and pretty." The discussion eventually led to a debate over why she described his hair being like a broom and not cotton candy or something else sweet, the way she described her mother. They wondered if her father was the one who made the author do chores and her mother baked with her. They were surprised I didn't know the answer to their query, but I think they also liked that I was a part of the discussion and the discovery. The use of the similes was straightforward and made sense to the students in painting a picture that they could see, and that gave a sense of Cisneros's view towards the members of her family. Right or wrong, we left the classroom not knowing, but it didn't matter. Students were left feeling like they "got it" and started to understand the power a simile can have for a reader.

Similes and Metaphors

A simile is something that you use to compare two different items that share a common element (*the man is as strong as an ox, my mind is like an ocean*) in order to vividly describe a scene or emotion. The word comes from the Latin word *similes*, which means *like*; in order to be a simile, *like* or *as* must be used in the phrase.⁸ The sort of similes that a child may create while writing about an animal, whether it be a pet or wild creature will be unique to their life experience. Exploring the ways that animals appear in a child's writing—the choices they make when comparing two dissimilar objects in a simile will allow us to enrich how we understand a student and their view on relationships and even how their view on the environment changes as they mature.

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Metaphors similarly compare two distinct items to suggest a likeness between them. How metaphor differs from simile is in that the word *as* or *like* are not used, instead: *the man is an ox, my mind is an ocean*. Instead of just a comparison, metaphor implies an identification, which is a stronger tie than showing similarity. Rooted in the Greek word *metaphora* which means *to transfer or to carry across*, the idea is that a metaphor can present a clear and fresh meaning in a concise and memorable way, bridging complex ideas and creating depth in the flat landscape of the page.¹⁰

While metaphors and similes can sound lovely, why are they important to student learning, particularly at the elementary level? Margaret Metzger, a long-term teacher of high school English, explains, "If students do not understand metaphor by sophomore year, they are lost in their literature courses."¹¹ I would equate this to a student who enters into a seventh grade algebra class and has not memorized multiplication and division facts. Without a strong foundation, it becomes much more difficult to do more advanced and complex problem solving. Understanding metaphors that are presented in elementary school will give students a chance to assimilate their new vocabulary and make meaningful connections between different ideas, people and periods of time. Metaphors can appeal to any of the five senses in a way that cuts the lines that divide people by race, gender or age. Children have common experiences related to animals: a bee sting, being licked by a squirming puppy, watching a bird soar overhead, to name a few. These universal experiences become the basis for metaphor and simile in order to accurately describe our lives to others. Several years ago I was swimming in the Mediterranean Sea and after about six strokes a jellyfish stung me. As I described the shooting fire-like pain that made me think I was electrocuted, the lifeguard knew instantly what had happened. You don't have to have been burnt with fire or electrocuted to imagine how it would feel and diagnose a situation. After becoming familiar with this type of figurative language and its purpose, it may make it easier to understand metaphors framed around the human-to-human experience. These common experiences around this subject matter will allow students to see and find things that they can relate to in characters, in historical figures, and even in their peers.

A common experience that children have had is being afraid of the dark or an unknown monster. Accessing

that fear that everyone has had will allow students to read a poem told from the perspective of a mother seal, comforting her pup.

Seal Lullaby By Rudyard Kipling Oh! Hush thee, my baby, the night is behind us.
And black are the waters that sparkled so green. The moon, o'er the combers, looks
downward to find us At rest in the hollows that rustle between. Where billow meets
billow, there soft be thy pillow; Ah, weary wee flipperling, curl at thy ease! The
storm shall not wake thee, no shark overtake thee. Asleep in the arms of the slow-
swinging seas.

The poem has clear echoes of the lullaby, "Hush Little Baby" so it is quickly apparent who are the speaker and listener. This is so strong that after reading it a few times, a reader is moved to attempt to sing the lyrics. The imagery paints a picture of the sea at night with the seals at rest on a beach after a turbulent day. The use of the repeated /s/ and /sh/ sounds throughout the poem further evoke the sounds of the sea. While the subject and the scene are different from a child's bedroom, the fears of a child and an animal may not be that different. I remember being scared of Jaws and thunderstorms as a child. The irrational fears that parents and lullabies help to alleviate are something people of all ages can relate to. It then wouldn't be difficult to turn this poem into a science lesson about the perils of being a young seal and how sharks patrol the shallow waters looking for an easy meal.

After seeing examples of normal life being creatively written about, students may start to do as Muriel Rukeyser says, "Breathe in experience, breathe out poetry." Metaphors and similes are born out of an individual's life experiences. Young children unknowingly create them to describe things they can't name or quite understand. When my nephew was three, a Harley motorcycle went down his street and he said it "roared like a lion." While his vocabulary wasn't huge at the time, he was able to relate a new experience to an animal he'd seen. Flashes of images that have stayed with us over the course of our lives have left a distinct impression on our senses: the sweet smell and warm feeling of cookies baking, the loud thunder and flash of lightning during a storm, the cooking of tamales at Christmas. In school and at home fairy tales and fables are told and retold to us and then passed on by us. Lullabies and songs from church, the playground and the radio stay in our minds, play in the background, a soundtrack that runs through our lives. The rhythm and rhyme of the melody that each person hears is as individual as our pool of life experience.¹² Culture, language, class, and environment provide us with differing metaphors at our fingertips that can surprise students, peers and teachers when these are accessed. Students with a range of abilities are able to succeed in creating something that rings true in an emotional and intellectual way.

Alliteration, Idioms, and Rhyme

In deliberating what sort of poem to begin with, I think "The Eagle" is a great place to start. The many elements presented in such a short piece make it more easily digestible to reluctant readers, and the impressive imagery is magnetic. At our school it works doubly well because our mascot is an eagle, and the large Mexican population are familiar with the eagle found on Mexico's flag.

The Eagle By Alfred, Lord Tennyson He clasps the crag with crooked hands; Close to
the sun in lonely lands, Ring'd with the azure world, he stands. The wrinkled sea
beneath him crawls; He watches from his mountain walls, And like a thunderbolt he
falls.

The poem above is simple and filled with great imagery. The simile in the last line, "And like a thunderbolt he

falls" creates a relationship between the eagle and a thunderbolt. The speed with which an eagle dives, the danger presented to an unknowing prey, the suddenness of the attack—the image captures all this. A lightning bolt strikes quickly, it is dangerous, and one can't see it coming until it already is there.

The link between alliteration, idioms, and rhyme is not obvious, but the three can be leveraged in teaching English Language Learners ELLs. All have a repetitious element that is noticeable and memorable and can be easier for ELLs to remember. While it may seem that in reading rhyme is more prevalent, when looking at advertisements and the way people speak, alliteration is found in much greater abundance. The "monitoring of language encountered in day-to-day reading and listening has resulted in a list of approximately 1,400 current alliterative sequences but only 110 ones that rhyme." ¹³

Alliteration occurs when you have the same sound at the start of every word or closely connected words. This is something we've heard in tongue twisters: *Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers*. The challenge associated with physically being able to say these kinds of things correctly and quickly is something children enjoy doing and practicing. But alliteration is more than just fun tongue twisters in the hands of a knowledgeable teacher! It helps students to remember certain phrases and idiomatic expressions.

In the Tennyson poem above, alliteration occurs several times. In the first and second line, "He clasps the crag with crooked hands; Close," the /cr/ and /cl/ starting sounds are repeated two times each. One way to look at this is to see the scene that has been created. There is a huge rocky wall (like Half Dome) that the eagle is clinging to while surveying the valley below. Imagine a small rock knocked loose, and the cracking, clacking sounds made as the rock tumbles down the steep face of the cliff. The /cr/ and /cl/ are meant to evoke this sound and add to the atmosphere of the poem. The alliteration not only makes you start to hear the tumbling of small rocks but it ties the eagle to the craggy cliff with his crooked claws. They are seen as one together. Build upon this and continue thinking about what might be heard in this kind of setting. Echoes. The continued alliteration "lonely land" and the use of the words "He watches from his mountain walls" become an echo of one another. In such a short piece the discussion of the placement of these phrases, sometimes close together, and other times far apart can help a student to experience these sounds in the poem. ⁵

Students access things by reflecting on their personal experience. But the beauty of poetry is that if you don't see one thing, maybe you see and identify with something else. My interpretation of this poem reflects a raptor management class I took in college in which we were able to help rehabilitate injured birds of prey. I remember the instructor told us that you hold an eagle on your upper arm, never your lower, because the strength of their feet can snap the smaller bones of your forearm. The tension with which they grasp onto a perch seems to be reinforced by the repeated use of the same sound. By carrying the sound to the next line, and using the word "close," Tennyson seems to be implying that the eagle is close and tight to both the crag and the sun, as if he were part of both. To me, the alliteration helped create tension in the poem and a sense of the danger to come.

Providing effective English language instruction for ELLs has become a focus of schools all over the US. Whether the student is newly arrived or advanced, the question of how to best serve these students who are all in the same classroom is an important one. Needs are different, but the material being introduced is most often the same. A way to approach both effectively is to look not at individual words or complete sentences, but phrases.

My First Best Friend By Jack Prelutsky
My first best friend is Awful Ann— she
socked me in the eye. My second best is Sneaky Sam— he tried to swipe my pie.

When providing instruction on a piece that uses alliteration to ELL students, teachers should give direct instruction on the alliteration that occurs. What we might consider obvious is not always apparent to ELLs when they initially read a text. Using the above poem as a model, students should note that the form of the poem is consistent. Each odd line provides a sequential ordinal number for the best friend and then an adjective shares the same first letter as the friend ends the line. The even line then provides an example of how the nickname was earned for that best friend. Students may start to think about similar nicknames they may give to characters they have read about. Assigning a descriptive alliterative trait will help them to see how a character evolves (or doesn't) in a story. Because students have a greater recall of phrases that use alliteration (*day dream*) than phrases that don't (*phone call*), ¹⁴ this may help with recalling and then analyzing character traits.

When students attempt to use alliteration in their own work, I have found that this is the time they will seek out a thesaurus to find a better word that has the sound they are looking for. While the connotation and denotation of that word are not always aligned with the meaning the student was going for, their effort, excitement, and now exposure to a new word outweigh the impreciseness of the usage. In the process, some new discoveries occur. They now own a new word that they are relating to their own lives. Every year around Mother's Day I've had the class do an acrostic poem for their mothers or someone in their family that they love. Inevitably someone will look for a synonym for love and find passion. They will write something along the lines of, "I have passion for you because you do nice things for me." Clearly this doesn't sound like what one should write to one's mother, so in the revision process, I clarify situations that fit using the word passion.

Idioms are expressions that can't be understood by knowing the meanings of the words that make up the phrase. However, they can be understood to have a different meaning from what the words in the phrase would imply. There is a generally accepted meaning to each idiom, but they can differ between cultures and countries. The word stems from the Latin *id'ima* meaning to make one's own. ¹⁵ English Language Learners find idioms particularly vexing to understand because the literal meaning provides no hint at all as to the actual meaning of the phrase (i.e. *kick the bucket*). Implicit instruction or scaffolding around a story containing idioms is often done at the elementary level to provide exposure to learners.

It is interesting to note that alliteration occurs in 28% of idioms that have two parts, (*black and blue*) and 42% of similes (*fit as a fiddle*). ¹⁶ Evidence suggests that those idioms that contain alliteration are more memorable to ELLs than those who do not have a phonemic pattern. This mnemonic effect, meaning a pattern of letters that helps you to remember something), should be recognized and leveraged when presenting idioms to students with the goal being to comprehend and remember figurative idioms.

Rhyme occurs when words end with the same vowel and consonant sound as in *like, bike* and *blue, shoe*. When I taught kindergarten, the ELL students had a really hard time hearing the rhymes on their own when asked if two words rhymed. They would almost always describe words that started with the same sound as rhyming, matching *box* with *boat* instead of *fox*. The focus on rhyming helps students recognize and make word families. By starting with *bad* a student who has mastered this idea can switch out the starting sound to create *dad, mad, sad*, etc. This simple idea of word families can help ELLs with starting the reading and writing process.

Content Objectives

Throughout the unit, students will read, question, think about, discuss, write and perform their own and others' poems that focus on animals. ¹⁷ At the completion of this unit, students will be able to identify structural elements of a poem, even if they don't understand the implication of what they all mean. In my fourth grade class students are given a project to create a house using a variety of polygons. After that unit I would expect students to be able to point out shapes in real buildings they see, but I wouldn't expect them to know that the triangles on the side of Notre Dame are flying buttresses. Specifically they will be able to provide a definition of a metaphor and how it differs from a simile and provide examples of each. The editing process should be evident in drafts of poems that show a consideration of diction. In final products attempts at using similes, metaphors, alliteration, and idioms will be evident.

Why Use Poetry?

The pressure in schools is to read more non-fiction and less literature with the thought being that non-fiction is more rigorous and useful to students in the long term. Literature is being pushed out and poetry seems to have become an afterthought. With the emphasis on rigor, it seems to me that poetry offers distinct advantages to students—particularly those in my school's population.

Over the last few years, students starting fourth grade have been reading at an average level of 2.4, equal to an average mid-year 2nd grader. Few students start the year already reading chapter books on their own, which ideally begins in third grade. At that time it seems they lack the endurance to sit and read for longer than 15 minutes, or have the ability to follow a story that takes several days to finish. Given their low reading level, it has not been surprising that their writing is generally underdeveloped.

The use of poetry would be a more appealing prospect for a struggling reader. The prospect of asking a class to read an eight-line poem instead of an eight-page story at the fourth grade level is much more palatable to students who are struggling to read. Front-loading vocabulary for ELD students will provide better context and understanding, in particular with the repeated readings they will be doing. In addition, it is more manageable for the teacher to present and for the student to digest.

Students started by hearing and then reading Dr. Seuss and similar books as emerging readers. The rhythm of the language and the rhymes are attractive and expose students to the music of language and the beauty of effective word choice. ¹⁸ Students enjoy rhyme and I have used it at every grade I have taught to help students remember information in a more playful manner. For example, singing the multiples of six to the tune of "London Bridge." I know for myself, I grew out of Seuss by second grade, and did not really see or experience a poetry unit again until reading Shakespeare in high school. At this point, it just seemed hard and mysterious and not at all fun. When talking with adult friends, their reaction to hearing I was going to go to Yale to study poetry was not envy but bewilderment as to why I would choose to spend my summer doing that.

The unit will consist of poems being presented and discussed looking at the various poetic elements that the author chose to use. Students will lead and participate in discussions as to why those choices were made and the value that the choices add to the piece. They will be able to identify and understand the meaning of metaphors and similes. The unit will culminate in students performing in a poetry read-a-thon where parents and other classes are invited to hear students read some of their favorite poems by authors or choose to

perform their own. They can include acting out the poem or presenting a piece of artwork or a photo they feel fits the poem. By going through the memorization and preparing to perform, students will be able to do a form of analysis as they make choices about tone and speed of the presentation.

Why Focus on Animals?

The reason I want to focus on animal poetry when the students are writing their own poems is because everyone has experiences relating to animals, regardless of background. Most children have pined for a pet of their own, been afraid of a dog, felt a cat's soft fur, or experienced death or serious illness for the first time through an animal. Children can relate to animals and don't require the classroom to create a first hand experience. I would like to see students stretch to explain emotions in a safe place that their peers can relate to and appreciate.

Research has been done on the idea of animals being a pedagogical support and motivator for learning. We should begin by recognizing that animals have lived alongside man for as long as history has recorded. This shows us that the relationship between man and animals, both wild and domesticated, is key to our mutual survival. Animals are very prevalent in children's literature as both characters and teachers. Consider E.B. White's book *Charlotte's Web*. The vibrant characters that make up the farm are all animals that are snuffling around in the barn, with Charlotte being the wisest and teaching about kindness and friendship through her actions. Only the young girl Fern is aware of the relationships that exist and what is really going on as she sits in the barn quietly observing the animals. Children are distinctly aware of animals and that an environment that seems empty due to lack of people is in fact breathing with life—as the habitat for birds, reptiles, fish and mammals. ¹⁹

This awareness of and attention to animals makes it possible for children to learn empathy from contact with animals. Gail Melson defined the idea of biophilia as, "a natural attraction children have to animals... a predisposition to attune to animals and other living things [that] is part of the the human evolutionary heritage." ²⁰ Children with developmental disorders have been shown to respond to requests and engage in conversation when a live dog is present. ²¹ The ability of children to relax and feel a greater sense of calm speaks to the concept of animals as the fourth educator. ²² Following teachers, parents, and the environment, animals become a constant presence in a child life and a relationship develops. Pets are often viewed as members of a family. Children are able to recognize the relationship and related responsibility—how the animals depend upon the family to meet basic needs. Children are able to speak with unashamed affection for their pets and describe them as friends that are individuals—with real or imagined personalities. ²³

The love and recognition of these animals' lives inevitably culminates in experiencing the death of that beloved pet. This glimpse into a harsh part of life doesn't get easier as you grow up, but it does help with learning empathy for others who have lost someone that is loved. The sense of respect and wanting to help and be with your family to support one another is practiced in a sense at this time. Below is an excerpt from a favorite.

The House Dog's Grave By: Robinson Jeffers
But your kind thought has laid me less
than six feet Outside your window where firelight so often plays,
And where you sit to read- and I fear often grieving for me-
Every night your lamplight lies on my place.

The poem's narrator is the dog that has died and the loyalty and selflessness he displayed throughout his life

is evident still in his thoughts from the grave. In its entirety, the narrator continues to think of his humans and feel that although they continue to live; he feels badly for them because they do not truly appreciate life. The joy that a dog experiences from its owner walking in the room is evident to anyone that lives with one. How often do people feel that same level of joy at seeing our loved ones? Seeing a reflection of love that is displayed for people by animals can make one realize how blasé they have become in their own display of emotion. I think children have a similar view of adults when going to or at places like amusement parks. Children are glowing with excitement and parents are annoyed at having to park so far away. Animals and children seem to share the ability to not be bogged down in the annoyances of life that can dominate adults' thoughts and then emotions.

While I think poetry is often seen as a way to express emotion, leveraging cross curricular knowledge to create poems is another aspect of this unit. As a part of the science curriculum, students will be doing a research project in the third trimester on an animal of their choice. As they are deciding what animal to choose and then performing research, they can create a bank of words that describe an animal's movement of physical characteristics. In the course of the year, I plan to expose them to different types of poetry: cinquain, haiku, acrostic, couplet, shape, etc., and then when they come to this project, they can find a style that fits the message of their poem.

Bear in There By Shel Silverstein There's a Polar Bear In our Frigidaire— He likes it 'cause it's cold in there.

The poem above is an excerpt of one that is appealing to children because of the situational absurdity; a polar bear in your refrigerator—ha! I would point out to my students that what makes it rich is the description of the animal, big hairy paws, the facts "face in the fish", and the verb choice, "munching" and "slurping." All of these are descriptors that are relevant to a polar bear that have been creatively put together.

Essential Questions

The question posed by our seminar leader, Langdon Hammer, and which for a bit stymied the educators in the room was, "how can poetry be defined?" After the discussion and realizing there are many answers to that question, and how you answer it is influenced by what you read. I think this is an important place to start because it makes students (and teachers) aware of the format and how there are very deliberate choices being made by the author in which established rules are either followed, broken, or both. When it becomes their turn to write, they will have their own definition of what poetry is, and that will then make it easier for them to create with confidence.

In fourth grade students are introduced to figurative language for the first time; inevitably someone will ask the question, "Why doesn't the author just SAY it is cold and stormy out?" While this is a question that students will continue to ask throughout their academic and reading lives, the essential question "What are poetic devices?" is the second area we will explore.

In tandem with exploring poetic devices, I want my students to understand the idea of imagery in poetry. Students will ask and answer "Why is imagery important to the understanding of a poem?" While a poem like "The Eagle" can be extremely short, a powerful image is often created that is a primary step towards appreciating the humor, horror or beauty of a poem.

The overall goal of this unit is for students to find joy in creating a poem of their own. I want the students to ask "How can I use my own life to create a poem that shows my thinking and feeling on an experience?"

Finding their own voice and realizing it is both unique and can say something that is universally appealing because it is true is powerful. It can be cathartic and a way to share parts of our lives that seems too personal and difficult to talk about. When we write a poem, others choose to read it, so they have a vested interest in us already. Talking about our problems doesn't give people an out—if I talk about it in front of you, you're going to hear it. By becoming the reader, we share a sort of responsibility to respond to that honesty and trust of sharing.

Teaching Strategies

This fall will commence my eleventh year of teaching all of which has been spent at Mt. Pleasant. I feel like I've had a unique experience and ability to learn about the community because I spent three years in kindergarten, two in second, and this will be my sixth year in fourth grade. As a result, I've been able to witness the development of students from their first day until they move on to middle school. While a few students would start kinder having been to pre-school and knowing letters and numbers, a similar number had never held a pencil or been away from their mothers. The growth these students would make in the year would be remarkable and most students left being able to read. Those who had started with no pre-school often blended with those who had.

As I moved up to the second and then fourth grades, a problem that has happened every year to a large number of students was a "summer slide." Students would leave a grade being on or slightly behind grade level, and would begin the fall six months behind where they had been. This seems to be a result of not reading in the summer and little exposure to academic language.

Over the last few years, students starting fourth grade have been reading on average in the middle of second grade. Few students start the year already reading chapter books on their own. At that time they lack the endurance it seems to sit and read for longer than 15 minutes or the ability to follow a story that takes several days to finish. Given their low reading level, it has not been surprising that their writing is generally underdeveloped. I have always struggled with helping students make meaningful growth in their writing over the course of the year.

Daily Infusing Poetry—Gradual Immersion

After some of the reading and research I've done, I think that framing the year around poetry could be the bridge towards creating stronger readers and writers. It seems that starting the year with a daily read aloud of a poem, where students are just listening and enjoying the sound and story of a poem, not considering the point of it. Careful selection of poems that are fun or contain a riddle to solve would allow the students to enjoy the music in a poem as well as increasing the breadth of exposure to different authors and types.

Over the course of the year, students would have different projects related to poetry. Our year is broken into trimesters, so the first trimester could involve reading poems as a class. One starting project is where they could create a class anthology of favorite poems and the students would present these to the class. The focus on a poem that the student likes and then needs to write and perform would allow them to really think about different types of punctuation in poetry and how to read a comma differently than a period. This focus could help with reading fluency in longer texts as students will sometimes read without stopping at any punctuation, and then not understand what they've read. Students would create and add to their own dictionary and thesaurus. Because each word in poetry is important, when a child is unsure or likes a particular word, they will be more inclined to suss out the meaning and record it for future reference.

One of the most difficult things in writing for any age is editing your own work. Students resist doing revisions thinking that when they are done, they're done! A bridge to starting editing is to take an existing poem, omit words and phrases and have students come up with substitutions. Demonstrating as a whole class the process of crossing out and changing words would provide a forum for discussing when and why changes make sense in writing: eliminating unnecessary or choosing more powerful words, being specific, and adding alliteration or rhyme. Rewriting a poem is less painful, in terms of the amount to review, than an entire story to redraft; it would encourage experimentation with word choice and order.

In the second trimester, as a class we could work on honing their ears and involving their senses in creating poetry. As a class, we could create word boards on flip charts related to different topics. Students would try to find descriptive words or similes to capture an observation they have made or something they have imagined. We would take these notes and phrases and create whole class poems on different topics—eventually creating a second class anthology. The idea of playing with words and finding pleasure in finding the "right" word would be the objective of this trimester.

The editing process would continue to evolve and develop. Students would work in groups to redraft whole class poems that had been created. The newly-written poem would be performed by the group to show the value in redrafting and how there isn't always a right answer with writing, but better words and phrases that can be developed.

The last trimester would evolve into students creating their own poetry. Flip charts that the class had created would be posted for referencing. Different types of poems would be introduced and students would have a project that would involve writing, revising, and presenting a collection of their own work.

In the third trimester, students study animal habitats and conduct a research report on the animal of their choice. Part of their poetry project could be to create a poem that incorporates some of what they have learned about their animal into a poem that highlights the animal's appearance, style of movement, or life cycle.

Classroom Discussion

When I first read "Hair" by Sandra Cisneros with my ELD students and asked them what they thought of it, there was a series of blank looks that stared back at me. In talking with other educators, this seems to be a common occurrence. The temptation is to let the students in on what is actually happening. Often teachers feel pressed for time and just want them to gain the understanding of the theme or image, but in doing this, we take away the process of discovery.

In my classroom, discussions at their best seem to happen in math. Students are confident in their answers. They can prove and get confirmation that they are correct or if they have thought of a unique way to solve a problem, even a more hesitant student will speak up. As the teacher, I can pose a problem, and let the students lead in demonstrating different methods of solving or viewing the problem. And on the occasion when I make a mistake (purposeful or not), they all will literally leap up to let me know.

When the subject changes to literature, students always seem to become or timid and unsure of themselves. They will agree with whomever they all acknowledge as the smart kids and discussion tends to end once those students have spoken, because in their view that is the right and only answer. Often in texts that are read at the elementary level, there isn't much ambiguity so the idea that there is a right answer is affirmed as being correct.

Poetry could become a useful bridge toward having respectful and fruitful discussions about literature that are student led. I would like to use the Fishbowl/Socratic discussion method. In this model, half of the students are in a circle in the center of the room having an active discussion. The rest of the class sits outside the circle observing and taking notes on how their partner is participating—by asking or answering questions or making observations.

Interactive Notebooks

Students will regularly receive poems that they will paste into an interactive notebook. They will have crayons or colored pencils to highlight different types of figurative language and make notes on the text they are reading. The connections they make and the ability to revisit and reference a large number of poems and differing styles will be something we will use over the course of the year.

Classroom Activities

Eric Carle

Up until this unit, the exposure that children have had to poetry has been limited to Dr. Seuss and what they have seen in their own classroom. In beginning the unit on children writing their own forms of poetry based on animals, I'd like to start with poems from the poetry anthology *Animals, Animals* because the poems are all accompanied by pictures that Carle created that match the imagery of the poem. The poems are mostly descriptions of appearance and behavior that are easy to understand. I want the students to see freedom and joy that the author clearly has while not seeming to try too hard.

The Duck Billed Platypus by Arnold Sundgaard for example is eight lines long, has a simple rhyme scheme and is full of scientific facts about the animal. The poem describes how it "lays eggs like a bird but suckles like an animal" and "hides in a hole and simply will not speak." The behavior of the animal is shown as well as how that animal is unique. Dorothy Aldis' *Every Insect* breaks down the anatomy of insects and how these are important to the survival of the animal. "But with feelers they can smell / Dinner half a mile away." In *Giraffes* by Mary Ann Hoberman, the author creates a simple list of the unique aspects of giraffes that explain why she likes them.

Students would be tasked to write a poem based on the animal they had been researching for their science project using one of the three poems described above as a model to follow. All would require the use of facts about the animal's behavior or appearance or something else they had researched. To make sure students are including new information they have learned in the course of their project, I make sure to have them ask themselves, *what have I included that a second grader doesn't already know?* If they can't point to anything, they need to go back and find something new that they have learned.

Blackbirds
A Bird Came Down the Walk
By: Emily Dickinson
A Bird, came down the walk -
He did not know I saw -
He bit an Angle Worm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,
And then, he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass -
And then hopped sidewise to
the Wall
To let a Beetle pass -
He glanced with rapid eyes,
That hurried all abroad -
They looked like frightened Beads,
I thought,
He stirred his Velvet Head. -
Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb,
And he unrolled his feathers,
And

rowed him softer Home - Than Oars divide the Ocean, Too silver for a seam, Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon, Leap, plashless as they swim.

After the more child-friendly poems, I'd like to move towards something with more interpretive value that provides some ambiguity. This poem seems an appropriate place to start for upper elementary students because they all have had an experience similar to what is being described in the poem—seeing a bird hopping down the street. While some of the vocabulary may be unknown plashless, this does not detract from the students' ability to understand the overall meaning of the poem.

This poem can be looked at over several days. This poem uses a consistent rhythm students should be able to hear. While there is a rhyme scheme and syllabication pattern developed, is not consistently followed throughout. The use of "short measure" refers to the use of very few beats in each line. Religious hymns are written in a similar short verse style. Dickinson grew up in a Calvinist home and her family held daily religious observations in their home and attended weekly church services. Playing a hymn with a similar pattern would help to highlight this connection. ²⁴

A discussion with students might then evolve for students to discuss what they hear in their environment and how the music they listen to influences the way they speak and write. ²⁵

The next lesson would address what Dickinson is actually describing in this piece. Our school has several resident ravens and other birds in abundance that I'd like to have students silently observe the morning we will be doing the second lesson. I'd like them to note some the actions the bird makes, how it moves on the ground and how that differs to how different it is when it flies. Upon re-entering the classroom, as a class we would start a word web around how the bird appeals to the senses of sight, touch, and sound. Extrapolating upon a word like black to describe the color might be linking it to night and creating the idea of how a simile or metaphor might be conceived. After creating this, we would then re-read the poem noting the metaphors that Dickinson created. Students should understand that the poem creates an image of the bird's actions and appearance using a variety of metaphors.

A discussion of the similarities and differences between the ideas/words/relationships that the class had with what Dickinson had could prompt a discussion of why there are differences. Do those differences have a meaning or just point to a different way of observing? A follow-up lesson to this piece would have the students examining Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."

V. Icicles filled the long window With barbaric glass. The shadow of the blackbird Crossed it, to and fro.

I think reading these two pieces back-to-back could lead to a good discussion about why both authors chose this animal. We see these birds every day; they aren't especially beautiful and they are noisy and not in a cute twittery way. The excerpt above makes the blackbird appear sinister, but this is only one view. The view labeled IV talks about the beauty of the blackbird singing. Describing differing character, unexpected beauty, sound, and changing setting allow the poem to not feel like it is all about the same 'common' animal. Stevens was able to make the blackbird seem exotic and mysterious—not just the annoying cawing birds outside my window at six in the morning.

I would like for the students to choose an animal, optimally the one that they did their animal report on. While coming up with thirteen would be a stretch for writers of any age, the report they do is broken into eight sections on which they did research. They could write a poem including details they learned about the habitat,

diet, enemies, survival status, etc.

While both activities described here circle around the possibility of writing specifically about an animal they have researched, I think this gives everyone a common starting point to be inspired and have something to say. The option and opportunity will be there to incorporate animals from their everyday lives as well. All of the poems that appeared in this unit will be introduced to the class and appear in their interactive notebooks. The basis for those discussions will follow a similar model as to what was described in the analysis of *The Eagle*.

Resources

Appendix A: Implementing Common Core Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.2, 4.3, 4.5, 4.7, 4.8, 4.10

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.4.3.A,B

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.4.5, 4.5A

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.Y.RL.4.5, 4.10

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.Y.RF.4.4, 4.4B, 4.4C

Students will learn to use specific language with sensory details in their poetry in both a single sitting and over an extended time frame. Punctuation will be chosen for the effect. Students will demonstrate an understanding of figurative language and can differentiate between similes and metaphors. Peers will edit each other's work to strengthen the writing. Attention will be paid in the editing process as to who the target of the piece is—friends, family, or academia. They will conduct a research report using print and digital sources.

Students will be able to explain what a poem is and read and comprehend grade level poems with accuracy and eloquence,

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