

Using the love of "poitchry" to improve primary students' writing

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"I Love Poitchry"

Poichry you are fun.

Poitchry you make me laugh.

Oh Poitchry, you are so much fun!

Tickle, tickle,

Your words tickle my tongue.

By Rebecca

If you teach primary grades, then maybe you've shared a disappointing experience during a writing lesson or writers' workshop. The stu-

dents are ready to sit down and begin writing, and you have prepared them in every way possible. The prewriting discussion was exciting. They all have a topic. The word bank is posted with lots of rich, descriptive language. Sure, they are only 6 years old, but you trust they can write on their own.

A few minutes later, you hold a conference with a writer who began his piece with "We went..." followed by a series of dry sentences connected with "and thens," and ended it with "We went home and went to bed." Where are the adjectives, adverbs, and emotion that bring "voice" to the piece? You know

your students have voice because their prewriting discussions were lively and rich, but how can you bring out that voice in their beginning writing efforts? This article explains our journey as we (the authors) incorporated poetry lessons in our classrooms to help first-grade students gain the confidence and skill to write more interesting pieces.

Our inquiry study

Our first-grade team at Wilson Elementary in San Leandro, California, USA, studied students' writing samples during the 2002–2003 school year and decided that we needed to focus on helping students bring voice to their writing. Our student population is urban and ethnically diverse, with 48% of them English-language learners and 54% on free and reduced-cost lunch. For the past few years our entire staff has studied methods for improving student literacy through a process called the Cycle of Inquiry. In it we look at student work, pose a classroom action-research question, and then try to find various solutions to the problem.

As we read through our students' samples, we noticed common patterns emerging that included weak beginnings and endings, lack of sensory detail (or sensory detail that was very formulaic, such as "I smelled....," "I heard....," or "I felt..."), and boring list-like sentences hooked together by a series of *ands* or *thens*. We decided that our students were missing some important aspects of writing and that by focusing on modeling and teaching how to write with them we could help bring the missing voice to the students' typically stilted writing. Our Cycle of Inquiry Question became, "How can students focus their ideas and include personal voice through sensory details?"

During monthly grade-level meetings, we discussed strategies and shared our progress. Lori (first author), a literacy consultant, helped guide our work by demonstrating lessons, providing resources, and asking questions that moved us to reflect on our teaching practices more deeply. She suggested that we try poetry as a first step in answering our Question. None of us had much experience writing or teaching poetry. We were definitely out of our comfort zone.

The first poetry lesson

Lori modeled the first poetry lesson with first graders in October using a Halloween theme. She showed some student examples from the book *Kid Poems: Teaching First Graders to Love Writing Poetry* (Routman, 2000, Scholastic), which contains poems written by students and lessons for using the poems to inspire students to write their own free-verse poetry. Lori began the lesson by asking the students what they knew about poetry. Students responded with the expected responses, such as "It rhymes" and "We sing poems." Then Lori showed on the overhead projector a series of poems written by other first graders. She stopped after each poem to ask the students what they liked and noticed about each poem and to chart their responses. Some of their comments included "Poems are short," "Poems are skinny," "Some poems are funny," and "We like the repetition." Then Lori demonstrated how to write a free-verse poem using two techniques that she observed from the children's poems in the book—sound words and repetition. As she wrote her poem in front of the children she conducted a think-aloud.

"Mrs. O's Halloween Poem"

Halloween
Boo, Boo, Boo,
Cries the ghost.
Oooh, Oooh, Oooh
Wind banging on my window
Hee, hee, hee
The scary witch
Halloween
By Lori

After writing her poem, Lori worked with the class to write a shared poem. Then she brainstormed with the group a list of Halloween words to repeat in Halloween poems. The students dove in to the activity with exuberance, and even the most reluctant students began writing with little hesitation.

"Halloween"

Dark, dark, dark
Moon
Bats
Frankenstein

Vampires
Halloween
Boo, boo, boo
Scary
By Ryan

After seeing the success of Lori's demonstration lesson, we (Gery, Kathy, and Karen) were eager to try it. We started with Lori's poetry lesson exactly as we had viewed it and continued with our explorations by giving students more opportunities to hear and write poetry until they became accustomed to writing their own verses. The quality of the poetry had a wide range, but the students were beginning to get the idea that they could repeat words, that sentences were not necessary, and that the writing could be brief. For the reluctant writers and those with limited English, these concepts were a blessing. Having word banks available and the opportunity to verbally share their ideas prepared and motivated these students to write down their thoughts, and we began to see poetry popping up spontaneously in the students' journal writing.

Phew, it is hot hot.
I better go into a big pool
Splash, splash
Cold water
Swim, swim, swim
C-c-cold!
By Anaceli

Sound poems

In the winter, we decided to add more detail and depth to our poetry exploration. We tried exposing the children to more sound poems, or poems with onomatopoeia woven throughout. First, we began by reading lots of books and poems with a variety of rich sounds. Books such *Hoot*, *Howl*, *Hiss* by Michelle Koch (1991, Greenwillow), *Barnyard Banter* by Denise Fleming (1997, Henry Holt), *The Noisy Book* by Margaret Wise Brown (1993, HarperCollins), and *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein (1974, HarperCollins) provided many examples of people, animal, city,

and school sounds. We listed all the wonderful sound words that we noticed in our reading.

After exhaustive reading and charting, it was time to write. The students were asked to write a poem on any topic, as long as it included sound words that would describe what was happening in the poem. The ideas were fresh, original, and included sound words not found on our classroom list. Poems described the sound of church bells on Sunday, the wind in your hair as you ride a bike, the slam of a door after an argument with mom, and many other experiences. The voice that we were looking for was there, and we were hooked.

Shoooo
Says the
Wind when
I am riding
My scooter
When it is a
Windy day
My hair
Feels cold
My hair goes up
Then down.
By Marty

Ding, ding
A bell rings
Because the church started
Mmmmm
The people are singing
Mmmmmm
LLLLL
We got to see
God
By Sylvia

Transitioning students from poetry to sentence writing

We became concerned that students might confuse the phrasing in poetry with sentences that we expected in other writing, and we were worried that students did not truly grasp the difference between the free form of poetry and writing a conventional

narrative. We noticed that some students became confused when we asked them to write stories, and they wrote phrases instead of sentences. Others, when asked to write poetry, found writing phrases difficult and wrote a series of sentences instead. We began to experiment with writing from narratives and poetry to show the differences and to avoid confusion.

We asked our classes to write a description about a noisy place. We wanted them to tell us about all of the sensory details at their noisy place—how it made them feel, what sounds they heard, and the things they saw. The pieces were wonderful, and many of them showed great voice.

"City Sounds Description"

At the city it is noisy.

I hear honk, honk from the cars and the trucks.

And I hear people getting their money from the bank, clink, clink.

I hear people calling, "Taxi." I hear a lot of talking in the city.

By Kristian

The next day we asked the students to create a web of the noises they might hear at the places they wrote about. We modeled how to pull out the noise words from a narrative and brainstorm more words for a poem. Then the students created sound poems using their web from the narrative. This activity made a clear distinction between narrative and poetry. We also decided to add the use of "skinny" paper when writing poetry and regular-width paper when writing narratives. Many of the children had noticed that poetry often looks different from other writing, so this was a wonderful, concrete strategy for making the distinction between poetry and other types of writing.

"City Sounds Poem"

Crashing cars

Honk, honk, cars

Booming cars

Vrooming cars

Banging cars

Swishing cars

Laughing child.

Ahh, goes the child.

Have you heard city sounds?

By Kristian

Nonfiction poems

During science and social studies, we read exciting nonfiction and also wrote poems. When studying habitats, the entire class studied a single animal. Together we asked questions, researched facts, and organized our answers to form a single, cohesive report. We then underlined words or phrases that we liked to reconstruct the information into a poem. After using this process several times as a class, students were able to do the same kind of writing in small groups, pairs, and individually.

This process for writing nonfiction poems was time-consuming, but it worked well because of the repetition and gradual increase in student responsibility. Initially, students had so many questions about a specific animal that we worked to sort the questions into general categories (e.g., eating, description, movement). As students became more responsible for the research, the questions were simplified so that they only had to answer these: Where does it live? What does it look like? What does it eat? Who are its enemies? What makes it special? We found that gathering facts through reading, watching videos, role-playing, touching artifacts, and making models provided us with the details that made the poetry come alive.

The following is a class poem about owls with phrases taken from the class report on owls. Students selected information from the report to include in the poem and then added sound words.

"Owls"

Screech!

Big eyes, pie face,

Hungry belly,

Whoo, whoo....

Sharp beaks, sharp talons.

Big wings, quiet wings,

Flapping, hunting,

Swooping down.

Eat furry things.

Running mice,

Crack, crack

Crunch, crunch.

Munching.

Yummm.

By Room 29

We also wrote poems after reading biographies. After reading *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by

Robert Coles (2004, Scholastic), we asked the children to describe her. We decided to write a group poem about her using true things we had learned. Each child contributed a word or phrase to our poem. It was written exactly as they dictated it. This was followed by a directed drawing of her with markers and crayons to include some of the details that had just been described.

"Ruby Bridges"

Black girl black girl
Wants to go to white school
Judge let her in
People yelled
People said bad words
People got mad
She was brave
She was smart
She learned a lot
Black girl black girl
We love you!
By Room 4

Guided writing with poetry

Certain classroom organizational structures allowed us to focus more effectively on our reluctant students and English-language learners while also challenging our more proficient writers. We used a guided-writing format similar to guided reading. Students were flexibly grouped according to their writing abilities. The independent groups worked on various forms of writing, including journals, narratives, story prompts, and frames as seat work while we used direct teaching to focus on the small groups' writing needs. This worked best when we completed the work during a three-day period of rotations. We also found that by continuing the use of skinny writing paper (with and without lines) we could emphasize the need to write phrases and not sentences whenever students were writing poetry.

Let students' voices shine through

We began our journey by asking, "How can students focus their ideas and include personal

voice through sensory details?" We found that poetry is an ideal vehicle for expanding on ideas and letting student voice shine through. This process taught us that when poetry is abundantly read, explicitly taught, and actively encouraged as an acceptable writing form in a first-grade classroom, the benefits are numerous:

- The experimentation and process of poetry writing enhances the narrative writing of students.
- Struggling and reluctant writers find success and acceptance. Writing brief pieces, repeating words that they like or know, and being unconcerned with standard grammar allowed these students to write freely. The success that our struggling students found with poetry writing made other writing tasks seem more approachable.
- English-language learners are free to play with language without concern for syntax or convention.
- More proficient writers are able to experiment with language, enhancing their creativity.

We found that writing poetry with our first-grade students prompted them to use voice and an abundance of creative language in their writing. We are pleased with the results and plan to continue using poetry with our first graders all year to encourage voice and build confidence in writing.

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