

2009

Poetry in the Classroom : Dish it up!

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This article was originally published as: Raven, H. (2009). Poetry in the Classroom: Dish It Up! *Practically Primary*, 13 (1), p.10-12. Original article available [here](#)

This Article is posted at Research Online.

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Poetry in the Classroom – Dish it up! (Helen Raven)

What have salad and poetry got in common? More than you think, depending on the experience, the ingredients and the presentation!

Growing up I believed salad meant lettuce, carrot and tomato chopped up and thrown into a bowl together! Plain, simple, pretty boring, but you knew what you were getting and at least you were eating vegetables! As I grew older I discovered that salad could come in many shapes and forms and be made from such a huge range of ingredients – rice, pasta, all sorts of vegetables, fruit, nuts – the list goes on! Salad can be presented as a work of art, it can be meal on its own or it can complement other dishes. Look at the salad bar at any restaurant and you will see what I mean!

Now, stop for a moment and think about your own attitude and approach to poetry in your classroom. What thoughts and images are conjured up? Do you read poetry to your students? Do your students read poetry? Is there variety in form, length and subject? Do your students write poetry? Does the poetry writing vary or is it a consistent diet of haiku and acrostic? Perhaps your experience and that of your students is limited by the “boring salad” mentality! The same ingredients, the same presentation and the same output every time – but, like having your own children eat vegetables, at least you have done your job.

So, what can we do to make the experience and writing of poetry more interesting and enjoyable? Let’s start with the understanding of poetry itself.

Poetry, historically, has existed for thousands of years, and as such, is an important part of our literary heritage. Novels are a comparatively recent form of literature and children’s stories even more recent. The Bible contains ancient poetry in The Psalms and in the chants and songs of the ancient victories of war. Verses have been found on papyruses and carvings from the early civilisations of man. Man has always found a creative and emotional outlet in writing verse.

Poetry is a part of nature – rhythm is present in the trickling of a stream, the whistling of trees in the wind, the song of birds. From the time our lives begin we naturally respond to rhythm. The beat of our mother’s heart is the first sound we hear and a sound that soothes tired, cranky babies to sleep on their mother’s chest. Even when we tap our feet impatiently or caress a loved one’s face tenderly we follow a rhythm that helps express our deep feelings, often without even realising it. Putting these feelings into words is the clever art of poetry.

Think of a time in your life when you have been going through a challenge or a triumph evoking strong emotions and feelings. Then you have heard a song on the radio that just captures how you feel and speaks to you? The song has become your catch cry, or your expression, for a minute, a day or for longer. This is an experience of total connection between poet and audience – for that is what you are doing – responding to poetry! That is what song lyrics are. Every time we sing along with the radio, move to the rhythm of a song, cut loose on the dance floor, we are responding to poetry and the feelings, visions and ideas captured and expressed by the lyricist, and complemented and extended by the musicians. Compare the lyrics of your

favourite love songs (easily found through Google) with some of the ancient Egyptian love poems also easily found on the internet. By exploring poetry in this way yourself, you can increase your own awareness and appreciation of poetry.

Response to its magic (poetry) is spread across humanity: in the mind of the intellectual, in the heart of the lover and in the rhythmical movements of dancers who respond to the lyrics of the songs which pound out in crowded rooms. (Saxby and Winch p 125)

Sincere poetry, embraces the world, making the commonplace extraordinary, revealing what is hidden beneath the surface appearance of things and people, exploring the inner life through the metaphor, and bringing to the surface feelings that are as real as the happenings that cause them. This is done through the power of the words and the potency of language. (Saxby p 162)

Even when a poem is about an experience unfamiliar to the reader or listener it can speak, and something of the experience is felt by the reader. For example, read Tarantella, by Hilaire Belloc; feel the changing rhythm and pace, taste the sweat of the dancers as the poem builds and fades with Belloc's memories.

Rediscover poetry for yourself – read it, enjoy it, seek out the huge variety of subject, form and poets. Then take it to your students. Read a little poetry each day, encourage your students to bring in poems they have read, songs they enjoy – read them, listen to them. Let the children respond in discussion, through drawings, through dance, through drama, through periods of silence.

Saxby and Winch tell us that the best verse written by children is that written by children who have been exposed to a wide variety of poetry over a long period. Children should be allowed to experience and enjoy poetry on a regular basis and with variety of type and expression.

Once students are exposed to a variety of poetry and allowed to experience and respond in different ways, they can be led to explore the conventions of the poetry itself and the analysis of the structure of the poems can take place.

At times teachers can, and do, fall into the trap of promoting only one type of poetry, this can leave children with a variety of misconceptions such as; all poetry must rhyme or that a poem must conform to a fixed structure or rhythmic pattern.

Writing poetry has many similarities with other creative outlets such as artistic expression. Just as creating a fine piece of art requires understanding of texture, colour, line, space, depth, perspective etc. So, too, the creation of a piece of poetry requires form, structure, depth, concise expression and other important elements. Most importantly, however, is that poetry is the creative expression of the poet - form, subject, pattern, word selection and rhythm are simply the tools available to be selected by the craftsman. Like art work, each poet has their own thoughts to express and should be permitted and encouraged to experiment and produce poetry that is truly theirs. Here are two examples of individual poetry by thirteen year old boy – his

experimentation with form, rhythm and rhyme are all apparent, his messages and own viewpoints are clearly expressed through his verse.

**Intact – An ANZAC Memorial Poem
By Francis Raven**

Like u they wished.
You wish for a "Wii",
their loved ones they'd wish to see.
You're late for a party so you weep.
They're in the trenches; all they want's a sleep.
You see a dead bird so you cry;
they watch as their mates get shot down and die.
You lose your shoes,
they lose a limb.
They wish for hope- a sweet lullaby;
all they get's a few shells pass'n by.
Thousands go, only hundreds come back.
They may have died but in history left their track.
They worked together with all hopes cracked.
They worked together to keep Australia Intact.

Perspectives

By Francis Raven

The end of the road,
Or the start of a new journey.
A half empty glass,
Or a half full drink.
A mistake or a life lesson.
Impossible, or just complicated.
Dreamer, or thinker.
It all has to do with perspectives

Recent medical research has shown that writing poetry can help improve both emotional and physical well-being. Dr Robin Phillip of the Bristol Royal Infirmary in the UK and US researcher Dr James Pennebaker from the University of Texas have both conducted extensive research into the healing effects of writing about one's experiences, particularly through poetry. What a wonderful tool to be able to pass on to young people in this fast powered, demanding world. As teachers we all want to make a difference to our students, what better way than to give children a creative way to express themselves and assist in their emotional development at the same time!

Take the natural enthusiasm towards rhythm and song that is inherent in all young children, immerse them daily in the poetic expressions of others in all the forms and

patterns available and you will find the teaching of poetry and its writing becomes a far more enjoyable and rewarding classroom experience for all.

So what do salad and poetry have in common? Both can be made with a variety of ingredients, presented in a variety of ways, experienced in many senses and ultimately be good for the overall health and development of the individual!

Saxby, M. *Books in the life of a child*. (1997) Melbourne: McMillan Publishers Australia Limited.

Saxby, M & Winch, G (1991) *Give them wings: the experience of children's literature*, 2nd edn, MacMillan, Melbourne, VIC.