TWO BIRDS, ONE STONE
Exploring Complex Writing through Poetry

Jason D. DeHart  |  jdehart@vols.utk.edu
Introduction

Before turning my attention to doctoral work, I was a classroom teacher for eight years. I can still recall the difficulties my students faced in meeting the new Common Core writing standards that came to our state in 2012. Without the resources made available by my school librarian, I would have been hard-pressed to address these demanding new standards with the creativity supported by the school librarian and the library’s resources.

Reading and writing are seen as integrated in the Common Core standards, so I had to provide opportunities for my students to read a variety of texts (Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman 2012). Lucy L. Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and Christopher Lehman have also pointed out the need for greater emphasis on expository and argument writing in schools (2012). and we certainly felt the effects of this paradigm shift as a school and as a district.

Complex writing standards now begin in early grades. Expository and argument writing is no longer reserved for later years of the educational path. To meet these standards, literacy teaching should start in the classroom, but should then expand to include engaging partnerships between classroom teachers and school librarians.

My classroom was one place where complex reading and writing tasks took place. (I worked with four to five clusters of eighth-grade students each year.) One glance at my classroom bookshelf indicated a wide variety of text choices, and the sometimes–haphazard arrangement of books also indicated that students had explored these titles. In fact, in my early years of teaching as I built my classroom from the ground up, I spent a big chunk of the money allotted for classroom purchases on books at used bookstores and online. I soon learned that a wider array of text choices and options were available a few minutes’ walk from my classroom—in the school library.

Among the texts I used, poetry served as an interesting vehicle for literacy experience. Our school librarian was more than happy to pull a multitude of examples from the shelves as well as provide access to computers so that my students could find poems and song lyrics that appealed to them. The work we completed as a class, in collaboration with our school librarian, began with locating the poems, and then turned to merging analytical writing and explanatory writing. My reading in education literature had made me aware that poetry has been included as part of research writing (Barrett 2011; Lahman and Richard 2013) as well as in teaching technical writing (Welch 2010). Poetry has even been explored as a qualitative research method (Lahman and Richard 2013).

What follows is an exploration of the way poetry became a powerful genre for instruction in my school’s library and in meeting the demands of writing standards.

Prelutsky, Music, and More

Before asking students to analyze poetry and write their own poetry, the school librarian and I opened up conversations about what poetry was and how it worked. Examples ranged from the child-oriented work of Jack Prelutsky and Shel Silverstein to the edgy tunes of modern musicians. These lessons sometimes took place in my classroom, and the school librarian would then lead a refresher course, covering elements of poetry and how to use the library’s resources, when we arrived for our class visit.

Often when I asked my students how many of them liked poetry, only one or two tentative hands went up, but a positive response was almost unanimous when I would ask about students’ involvement with music in their lives. This enthusiasm is one of the reasons why music has the potential to serve as one entry method into the world of poetry and, consequently, into the larger world of composition and publication. Being able to use music in instruction speaks to the power of a well-equipped school library where students can find lyrics and listen with headphones.

I recall one student’s use of Taylor Swift’s music, and the way this student navigated the lyrics of the song “Blank Space.” The student shared a reading of the poem, and then talked about how the song worked liked poetry. Such opportunities were wonderful pathways for my students to see that they were actually encountering poetry every day when they listened to music. I enjoyed the student’s approach so much that we used this song as an example text for poetry in later classes. Another student used cleaned-up lyrics from an Eminem song—an author the learner would probably not have found in our textbook! When it was time to write our own poems, these accessible examples were great mentor texts.

Once our refresher lesson was done, the work of the educators in the room was to help students find the resources that interested them most, including poetry collections and webpages that featured the kinds of poems in which students expressed interest. This infusion of creative arts showed the how, or craft, of writing in compelling ways, and students still need exposure to a
variety of texts as they begin working on more-demanding modes of writing. The opportunity to use poetry allowed students to begin with writing analytically, looking at how the poets used language and what experiences they were trying to convey, and then move on to explain why the songs were important.

Including poetry (and music) as part of the language arts curriculum has the potential to provide students with brief exposures to analysis and response to songs and poetry, developing skills that can then be carried over into lengthier writing and reading processes.

**Modeling and Transforming Verse**

Stage two of the teaching process involved modeling. It was not enough to read poetry to understand it and to meet the requirements of standards; I felt my students should be immersed in verse. Knowledge of poetry and writing craft could not simply rest on textual analysis. Effective teachers model activities and skills for students (Allington and Cunningham 2007), and writing is certainly no exception.

The school librarian found examples of poetry, both old and new, and these were available for students in stacks of books on the tables. I worked in the library space to provide models of my own writing. Students listed key words and concepts they wanted to explore in verse, and then I would model writing a poem for students, and then write a second poem with the students to further support understanding of the process. Sometimes these words even came from other content areas. Words from math class included “scatter plot,” “numerator,” “denominator,” and “irrational number,” and we composed a break-up song/poem using these words. We used words from science class about fossils, and words from the period the students were studying in history. Because we were in the library, students would often move to the shelves and find books about what they were studying if they wanted to learn more about an item or concept that came up in the discussion.

The modeling process means that the educator must be willing to step out and compose on the spot at times, but also have preplanned writing structures in place for models at other times. I have spent years writing poetry, and so I was comfortable writing with students as they came up with vocabulary words to explore. In fact, as a person who writes and publishes poetry, this part of the lesson was an opportunity to share my love of the genre!

Classroom teachers and school librarians must also possess the professional insight and expertise to ascertain the best way to model, either on the spot or with an existing document, for students, depending on the type of writing being explored. Furthermore, and quitevaluably, students can gather useful information about the writing process by watching adults step into the process themselves and offer insight into their own habits of composition and self-correction.

Composing in front of students can serve as an ideal spot to include think-alouds, which have been identified as one concrete way to make the processes of literacy evident for learners (Wilhelm 2001). Our school librarian would think aloud about the ways to access a text, and then I would think aloud about composing a text.

The process of actually writing poetry meant that students were not only functioning as critics, but also as creators of poetry themselves.
Modeling through Publishing

In today’s electronic world, students have many opportunities to explore avenues for publication of their own writing, including resources listed at Poets & Writers (<www.pw.org>) and Every Writer’s Resource (<www.everywritersresource.com>). In the closed-off walls of a classroom, it might be difficult to reach out to these resources, but a vibrant school library can provide a direct line into electronic texts and traditional print resources, like poetry collections, for learners.

Students can learn from educators who are themselves actually publishing, and then find opportunities to publish their own work. These real-life examples can send the very direct message to students that voices can be heard outside their own circles of family, friends, and classmates, and that there is value in exploring publication opportunities—not just in learning how to type hand-written essays into computer programs. The Web served as one place that my students could find resources, but our school librarian also provided access to published anthologies that featured young people taking on the role of author/poet. Libraries are places where the written word is celebrated, and publication is certainly part of that.

After my students had had the opportunity to explore poetry from an analytical perspective, and from an explanatory perspective, we discussed how the end point of their own writing could be publication. Examples of prose writing that had been accepted for publication provided models of how the craft of poetry could be found within prose. For example, the works of author Ray Bradbury served as examples of prose writing in which the author inventively used poetic techniques.

Teachers and school librarians need not be shy about sharing their own work; they can be bold examples of not just educators, but authors and collaborators, thus encouraging students to step out of their comfort zone and explore writing modes. While we did not require students to publish, this part of the lesson process gave a brief, real-life glimpse into how students could use their words beyond the library and classroom, and provided an opportunity for young writers to think about how they might apply the skills we were learning, not just on a state assessment but in their future work.

Conclusion

Creativity need not be sidelined in the interest of expository and argument writing expectations; rather, artistic expression can be used as a way to encourage students to personalize and explore language. Libraries are ideal places to explore print and digital texts, and school librarians and classroom teachers can find exciting ways to collaborate around a variety of genres.

Poems, particularly those with open-ended or narrative writing styles, can be used in an analytic way to show students the connections between story and their own thinking. Students can compose poetry with their teachers for brief experiences in exploring the craft of writing. The lesson process can then bravely step out into the world of publication and help students develop a growing author identity.

It is our task as educators to make the writing process real and engaging for students in a way that demystifies concepts of what it means to be an author. We can then link these ideas to the demands of curriculum and standards; in effect, we can strike down both birds with one pedagogical stone.

Jason DeHart is a PhD candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where he is working toward his doctorate in literacy studies. Formerly a middle school teacher, in 2015 he was honored by Bradley County Schools as System-Level Teacher of the Year. In 2015 he was awarded the Chancellor’s Fellowship at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Reading Teacher published his article “I Can Teach Little Ones Too” in June 2018. His “Strategies for a Safe Literacy Space for English Language Learners” was published in April 2018 by Kappa Delta Pi Record. He blogs and reviews books at <literacyworkandplay.blogspot.com>.

Works Cited:


